GAME OF THE YEAR THE 2016 WINNERS!

KABY LAKE CPU & 270-SERIES BOARDS
THE ULTIMATE GAMING PC? TESTED!

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

REVIEWED

RESIDENT EVIL7: BIOHAZARD
SPACE HULK: DEATHWING
MEMORANDA
NEFARIOUS
IMPRINT-X
SPIFFING

MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA

EXPLORE THE STARS TO FIND A NEW HOME FOR HUMANITY

\+

CES 2017

ALL THE LATEST DIRECT FROM THE SHOW FLOOR!

STAR CONTROL

THE CLASSIC 90S SCI-FI GAME IS BACK

nextmedia

9 771326 564019 59

ISSUE #259
$13.99 • NZ $15.90 INC GST

- 6 TO 10TB
- 7200RPM
- 300TB/YEAR WORKLOAD
- MULTI TIER CACHING TECHNOLOGY
- 5 YEAR WARRANTY
- FREE SEAGATE RESCUE SERVICE

BARRACUDA
COMPUTE

Rescue
DATA RECOVERY
SERVICES

BARRACUDA PRO
FOR A FIERCE PC

VERSATILE • FAST • DEPENDABLE

LEARN MORE AT SEAGATE.COM

seagate.com

© 2016 Seagate Technology LLC. All rights reserved.

• 5X FASTER THAN STANDARD DRIVE
• FLASH ACCELERATED PERFORMANCE
• MULTI TIER CACHING TECHNOLOGY
• 5 YEAR WARRANTY
1TB
FireCuda
2TB
FireCuda
ST2000DX002
SEAGATE
FIRECUDA
COMPUTE
FIRECUDA
FOR THE FASTEST SPEEDS
BIG • FAST • DURABLE
SEAGATE

>PCPP #259

ON THE COVER

MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA

p. 36
Shepard's story is over, but the Mass Effect saga continues

REVIEW

SPACE HULK: DEATHWING

p. 55

Stompy human tanks versus bitey alien menaces

TECH

KABY LAKE MOTHERBOARDS

p. 84

Is it time to update your gaming system?

TECH

MSI AEGIS 3

p. 69

We're pretty sure it's a Transformer

CONTENTS

FRONTEND

10 News
26 PCPP Interview: Star Control

OPINION

20 (Un)Real Life
22 JAM
24 Generation XX
97 The Last Word

FEATURES

28 A Collection Aside
32 10 to Watch
36 Mass Effect: Andromeda
42 Game of the Year 2016

GAME REVIEWS

55 Space Hulk: Deathwing
58 Resident Evil 7: Biohazard
60 Nefarious
61 Imprint-X
62 Infinity Wars: Reborn
63 Memoranda
64 Her Majesty's Spiffing

TECH

69 MSI Aegis 3
70 BenQ W1210ST
72 Kaby Lake and 270-Series Mobos
76 Asus ROG Spatha
76 BlasterX Siege M04
77 Asus Rog Centurion 7.1
77 ZQ Racing Alien
78 Scuf Infinity Controller
79 BlasterX Vanguard K08
79 BlasterX Senz3D
80 CES Report
88 Hotware
90 Inventory

STATE OF PLAY

94 Hagionaut

REGULARS

8 Inbox
9 My PC
98 Next Month

p. 87

19 DOWN AND MANY MORE TO GO

It's 2017. Time flies when you're having fun. It feel like I took over sitting in the big chair for this magazine only a few months ago, but this is my 19th issue, not counting tech specials. One of the reasons that my time with PCPP seems to go so fast is that PC technology, and gaming as a whole moves at such a rapid clip. This issue sees the release of Kaby Lake CPUs and the 270-series mobos that house them. Pretty soon we'll have final details of the Ryzen CPUs from AMD and a new CPU race will most likely begin. This will speed things up again, both from a developmental and marketing standpoint.

Whilst not quite as exciting as a new generation of CPUs or GPUs, one major new trend in PC technology seems to be some diversification. Only a few months ago, HyperX, the gaming brand of Kingston, stepped out of its headset comfort zone and released a rather excellent keyboard. This month we received the first gaming keyboard and mouse from Creative, a company best known for soundcards, headsets, external DACs and speakers. Without mentioning any names so as not to break any NDAs, in the coming months we'll also be seeing some full systems coming from companies that have only done components before, and more peripherals coming from companies that have never dipped a toe in the market before.

All of this just goes to show how big a marker gaming is and how important PC gaming is in that market space. For all the stories over the years of PC gaming dying, PC is the only game space that is showing continuing innovation and growth. It's an exciting time to be writing about it, and this year is shaping up to be a seriously crazy year on the technology front, with new CPUs, new GPUs, Quantum Dot monitors, HDR monitors and a whole lot more. The gaming front is looking just as interesting, with the release of a number of huge Kickstarted games, reboots of beloved franchises, and enough new IPs to choke a horse. We can't wait to bring it all to you.

Daniel Wilks
PC Police
@drwilkenstein

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"Doctor, doctor, give me the news. I got a bad case of loving booze"

Chanted "Poke the bear! Poke the bear! Poke the bear!"

"The wang slider is a step towards equality in games"

PC PowerPlay

EDITORIAL
EDITOR Daniel Wilks
dwilks@nextmedia.com.au
GROUP ART DIRECTOR Malcolm Campbell
mcampbell@nextmedia.com.au
TECH EDITOR Bennett Ring
bennettr@internode.on.net
SPACE LORD Ben Mansill
bmansill@nextmedia.com.au
SUB EDITOR David Wildgoose
INTERN We need a new one

CONTRIBUTORS
James Cottee, Alex Mann, Terrence Jarrad, Meghann O'Neill, Theo, Morte, Nathan Lawrence, John Robertson, Tavish Forrest, Chris Stead, Dave Kozicki

ADVERTISING
GROUP ADVERTISING MANAGER TECH & GAMING
Cameron Ferris
cferris@nextmedia.com.au
(+612) 02 9901 6348
M: 0405 356 419

ACCOUNT MANAGER TECH & GAMING
Sean Fletcher
sfletcher@nextmedia.com.au
(+612) 02 9901 6367
M: 0402 585 124

ADVERTISING TRAFFIC
Charles Balyck
cbalyck@nextmedia.com.au

PRODUCTION & DIGITAL SERVICES Jon Bishop
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR Carole Jones

SUBSCRIPTIONS
www.mymagazines.com.au
TOLL FREE **1300 361 146**
Locked Bag 3355, St Leonards NSW 1590

COVER DISC ENQUIRIES:
dwilks@nextmedia.com.au
02 9901 6100

nextmedia

Building A, Level 6
207 Pacific Highway
St Leonards, NSW 2065
Locked Bag 5555,
St Leonards, NSW 1590

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
David Gardiner
COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR
Bruce Duncan

PC PowerPlay is published by nextmedia Pty Ltd ACN: 128 805 970, Building A, Level 6, 207 Pacific Highway, St Leonards NSW 2065

© 2011. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be reproduced, in whole or in part, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed by Bluestar WEB Sydney, Distributed in Australia by Gordon & Gotch. ISSN 1326-5644.

The publisher will not accept responsibility or any liability for the correctness of information or opinions expressed in the publication. All material submitted is at the owner's risk and, while every care will be taken nextmedia does not accept liability for loss or damage.

Privacy Policy: We value the integrity of your personal information. If you provide personal information through your participation in any competitions, surveys or offers featured in this issue of PC PowerPlay, this will be used to provide the products or services that you have requested and to improve the content of our magazines. Your details may be provided to third parties who assist us in this purpose. In the event of organisations providing prizes or offers to our readers, we may pass your details on to them. From time to time, we may use the information you provide us to inform you of other products, services and events our company has to offer. We may also give your information to other organisations which may use it to inform you about their products, services and events, unless you tell us not to do so. You are welcome to access the information that we hold about you by getting in touch with our privacy officer, who can be contacted at nextmedia, Locked Bag 5555, St Leonards, NSW 1590

ASUS
IN SEARCH OF INCREDIBLE

ASUS Z270 SERIES MOTHERBOARDS

OUTSHINE THE COMPETITION

BEST-SELLING

- World's No.1: Most motherboard sales for over 10 consecutive years, with over 500-million sold since 1989.

WORLD'S NO.1 MOTHERBOARD BRAND

EASY TO USE

- Aura Sync: World's 1st synced RGB lighting with intuitive and comprehensive controls to orchestrate Aura Sync-capable hardware.
- 5-Way Optimization: One-click system-wide overclocking and cooling tuning, with uniquely tailored profiles.

ASUS AURA SYNC

STABLE

- 5X Protection III: Multiple hardware safeguards to protect components from damage by power or electrical surges.
- 790+ DDR4 Modules Supported: Industry-leading DDR4 memory compatibility for best flexibility and reassurance. *Precise support varies by model.

5X PROTECTION III

TRUSTED

- Most Awards from last gen: 2X more accolades than all other brands combined, making ASUS the brand you can trust.

2X AWARDS THAN OTHER BRANDS COMBINED

The **BEST** Motherboard – **B**est-selling | **E**asy to use | **S**table | **T**rusted

ASUS Australia & New Zealand **www.asus.com.au**

Inbox

Don't blame Theo if lightning wrecks your PC. Blame yourself.

LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS!

Write in to PCPP with your rants, considered opinions, and endless run-on sentences of pure awesome. The address is letters@pcpowerplay.com.au. Each letter read by hand! This month Ben scores himself a copy of the hottest FPS of 1996, Strafe, courtesy of Double Jump and Devolver Digital.

THE BROWN NOTE

Hey guys,

I must say I was quite surprised and a little disappointed that you were recommending surge protectors but didn't mention a UPS at all. The chance of a surge on an Australian power grid is extremely minimal. Since moving to Phillip Island, the only time I've experienced a surge was on Black Saturday weekend when the trees fell on the power lines. Then the lights went so bright at least 6 bulbs in our house popped instantly. That's a surge. However, the biggest problem for computer equipment are brown outs (momentary interruptions in the mains power supply). These power outages are long enough to reset your oven clock and shut off your desktop PC's power supply but not long enough to be a proper power cut. I have had at least 1,000 of these power cuts since I moved to Phillip Island. Thanks a bunch SPAusnet, Ausnet or whatever you call yourselves these days. These are the ones that can kill your fridges, split system air conditioning units, garage door rollers and - specifically for us techies – modems and PC power supplies.

I have found that brown outs have caused damage to a great number of my own modems and those of my customers over the years. They really don't like those little drop outs in their power supply. Whether it's the modem or the power adapter, I can't say. But either way, if they haven't been on a UPS (Uninterrupted Power Supply) a.k.a. battery backup, they generally are dead after a small amount of these power outages. Obviously the other really bad thing about power outages is your desktop PC will be shut down instantly if you experience one. This is undoubtedly harmful to the OS but also to the components. Windows will usually recover and repair itself if required, but not always. Sometimes though, it can mean a machine just won't turn on again at all. At least with a UPS you can prevent damage from these momentary interruptions as your PC components are all plugged into the UPS and feed off the battery and not mains power. If it ends up being a long-term outage, you have the opportunity to turn off your computers and other devices before the battery runs out.

So, if you consider the amount of money one of those 'fancy' surge protector power supplies costs, it's actually absurd to buy one. A far better option is to buy a UPS. These will also protect you from power surges – most of them can even protect you from a lightning strike! Although I've never wanted to test this function, usually opting to turn off my modem during a thunder storm. Do you really want to risk testing out your gaming rig as a lightning conductor?

My preference for a UPS is Cyberpower but the ones from Eaton or even Belkin can also be very good. Eaton are pricey and Belkin tend to be a bit crap though. But, for as little as $150 you can protect all the electronics in your office/room/lounge/etc. I think that's probably one of the best purchases a gamer can make – especially if you live in rural Australia where the power infrastructure sucks.

I'm not a reseller for Cyberpower by the way. I just know, from experience, how good a UPS is for saving your expensive sh!t from harm. Best $150 I've spent to be honest.

Cheers,

Ben

Hi Ben, we understand where you're coming from. Whether to opt for a surge protector or UPS really depends on where you are. For a lot of us, the last black or brown out is a distant memory, but in many areas, both to the outskirts of the major cities and places further afield, power disruption is an unfortunate fact of life. You're right that we should have included a UPS. It may not be necessary to the majority of readers, but $150 for what is essentially long term insurance is a good investment.

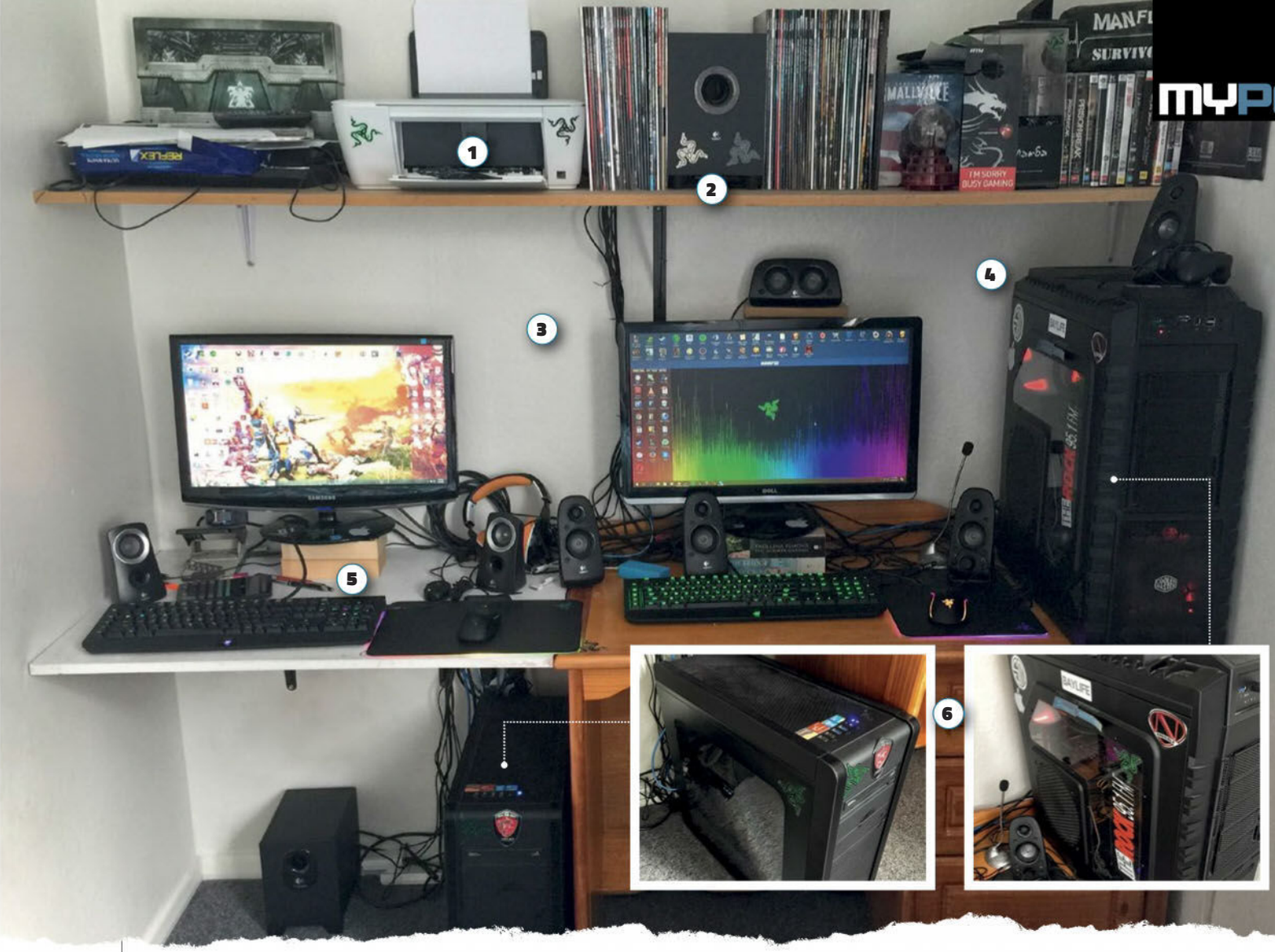
FEEDBACK #258

› **Wes Smith:** Show the imperial guardsman some love and put them on the next cover, or troll loads of wh40k fans and post space doggos

MAKE YOURSELF HEARD!

facebook.com/pcpoweplay

www.pcpowerplay.com.au



AUKE AND ALI, 23 AND 25, AUKLAND

This month's MY PC brought to you by RAZER

What's better than one computer? Two! My wife and I love to game together as you can see. We have this awesome setup with our two computers I built myself. I first built my computer at 15 and haven't stopped building since. I built the computer on the right 5 years ago - it still has my original hard-drive in it which is 8 years old now. My wife asked to play with me, so we started with local co-op on my computer. We soon ran out of games, and she kept begging me for her own computer. I then built my wife's computer on the left, which is now 2.5 years old. She handpicked the parts she wanted, with a bit of advice from me. She did inherit my old GPU though, a 580 GTX.

MOST IMPRESSIVE ELEMENTS:
1. HAF-X Full Tower Case
2. Gigabyte GTX 770 WindForce
3. Hydro Series H100 Ripjaws
4. Intel i5 3570k overclocked to 4.4 GHz

LAST UPGRADE: Phanteks 120mm fan.
DREAM UPGRADE: A 1440p 27" monitor.
MOST IMPRESSIVE ELEMENTS:
1. BitFenix Shinobi
2. MSI Z97 Gaming 5
3. 2x8GB G.Skill
4. Intel Core i5-4670K Processor

LAST UPGRADE: 1TB Western Digital HD

1. We didn't know that Razer made printers
2. We didn't know they made Logitech subwoofers for that matter
3. The family that plays togehter stays together, so long as one of them isn't a kill stealing monster
4. A five-year-old machine can still pack quite a punch
5. Now this looks like something Razer might actually make
6. Side by side: Beauty and the Beast

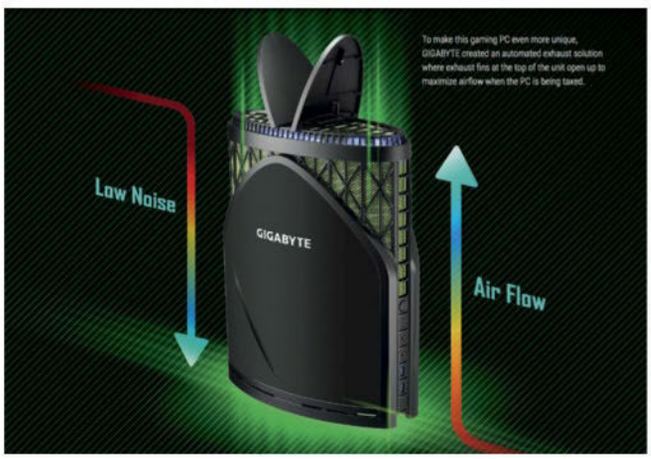
AUKE AND ALI WIN!

Thanks to the good people at Razer, both Auke and Ali score themselves a sweet Razer Deathadder Elite Enjoy!

WANT FREE STUFF? Send your MyPC entry today to *mypc@pcpowerplay.com.au*. Include the four most impressive elements of its hardware, your last upgrade, your dream upgrade, your favourite feature and what you think makes your PC special. Make sure to include your name, age and location. And last but not least, attach a 5MP or bigger image of your PC! No camera phone shots, and make sure it's in focus!

GIGABYTE'S BRIX GAMING GT PACKS A GTX1080 GPU INTO A 10L CHASSIS

Gigabyte has introduced a new computer in its popular BRIX brand of compact machines. The Brix Gaming GT manages to include an i7-6700K CPU, an Nvidia GTX 1080 GPU all in a small 10L chassis, measuring 276 x 384 x 128mm. Impressive! There's also 32GB of DDR4 RAM, an M.2 SSD as well as a 2.5" HDD, 802.1ac Wi-Fi, Killer gigabit LAN, Thunderbolt 3 and USB 3.1. The Brix Gaming GT puts all the ports at the bottom of the small tower, so cables can be neatly routed under the machine and then tied together in a tidy tail that runs out to your monitor, power outlet and whatever else you've got plugged in. The GB-GZ1DTi7-1080-OK-GW doesn't have a launch date or price yet, but if you're a gamer with little space who doesn't want to compromise on performance, keep an eye out for it.


To make this gaming PC even more unique, GIGABYTE created an automated exhaust solution where exhaust fins at the top of the unit open up to maximize airflow when the PC is being taxed.
Low Noise
GIGABYTE
Air Flow

AMD'S DETAILS RYZEN CHIPSET SPECS

AMD hasn't been sitting still either, as it's been preparing CPUs based on its new Ryzen core for launch soon. At CES it got a few of its partners such as Asus, Gigabyte, MSI and ASRock together, to show what motherboards and chipsets we can expect to go with the new CPUs and AM4 platform. The flagship chipset is the X370, sporting native USB 3.1 Gen 2 ports, dual PCIe 3.0 slots, 32 PCIe Lanes, 4x SATA ports, dual channel DDR 4 support and, excitingly, multiplier unlocked overclocking, regardless of which CPU is installed. The B350 is AMD's mainstream Ryzen chipset, which supports pretty much everything the X370 does, just with a fewer SATA ports and less PCIe lanes. If you want some Crossfire action, the X370 chipset is for you. Ryzen and the associated motherboards should be in PC stores by April 2017.

INTEL RELEASES NEW 7TH GEN KABY LAKE DESKTOP CPUS

Intel has released its new 7th generation desktop CPUs, dubbed Kaby Lake. It's still based on the 14nm Skylake process, but has been optimised a little. Overall it's not a huge jump in performance or features. That said, one of the main features Windows 10 desktop users will appreciate is Speed Shift. This improvement of the Speed Shift feature allows for much more fine grain automatic overclocking of the CPU, meaning a CPU can reach peak frequency in 10-15 milliseconds rather than 30. Kaby Lake also brings support for 3D XPoint memory - Intel's much hyped new form of memory that's currently used as an optional super-fast caching drive to sit between your RAM and SSD. Raw performance wise, Kaby Lake doesn't have a significant improvement over the previous Skylake CPUs. In some benchmarks, the results are identical - so unless you're building a new rig, there's little point upgrading.

SAMSUNG

Launching new possibilities

NVMe SSD 960 PRO/ EVO

Experience the power of performance unleashed with NVMe PCIe Gen 3.0 X 4, packaged in an M.2 form factor offering exceptional storage capacity. The Samsung SSD 960 PRO and 960 EVO deliver performance beyond previous generations of Samsung SSDs, enabling you to do more. The SSD 960 PRO has sequential read and write speeds up to 3,500 MB/s and 2,100 MB/s, and up to 2TB capacity.*

www.samsung.com/au

* Maximum performance values for the 960 PRO. Results may vary based on the user environment.

RAZER'S TRIPLE SCREEN LAPTOP PROTOTYPE

Razer showed off a cool triple display laptop at CES. Yep, you read that right - a laptop with three monitors! From the outside, it looks like your typical chunky gaming laptop with a 17" screen, but hiding behind the main display are two more 17" displays that fold out to provide a total of three, 4K Sharp IGZO LCDs, each with 100% Adobe RGB colour accuracy and Nvidia G-Sync support. The laptop also has a mechanical keyboard, Chroma RGB lighting all over it, Razer's Vapour chamber cooling system and is made from aluminium. The downside is that the laptop is 3.81cm thick and weighs 5.4kg. This beast of a laptop, called Project Valerie, unfortunately is just a prototype. Razer has no plans to mass produce them, sorry for getting get your hopes up. Maybe if you send Razer an email begging for one they'll change their mind?

HDMI 2.1 SUPPORTS UP TO 10K RESOLUTION

HDMI 2.1 is now a thing. This new version of HDMI brings loads more bandwidth to the popular video connector, allowing resolutions and framerates all the way up to 10K, 120fps. To get all that bandwidth, you probably need a new cable that's thicker, better insulated and has more copper in it - the HDMI Forum is calling this a "48G" cable, as it allows the full 48Gbps of bandwidth required for those insane resolutions. But HDMI 2.1 is backwards compatible with the existing 2.0 standard, so current cables could support up to 8K resolution if they're half decent. As part of HDMI 2.1 is an almost FreeSync/G-Sync like feature that allows variable refresh rates, called Game Mode VRR, that allows for more fluid gameplay and will work on consoles and PCs. It should start popping up on devices mid-2017.

ASUS'S TINKERBOARD IS A RASPBERRY PI ON STEROIDS

Asus quietly announced the Tinkerboard - a single board computer very similar to the Raspberry Pi. Unlike the Raspberry Pi, the Tinkerboard has gigabit Ethernet, 2GB of RAM, hardware H.265 video decoding and a quad core 1.8GHz ARM Cortex-A17 processor from Rockchip. The Tinkerboard is powered via micro USB, has a microSD card slot, HDMI & 3.5mm audio output, 4x USB 2.0 ports, 802.11b/g/n Wi-Fi and a 40-pin GPIO connector - just like the Raspberry Pi. It runs a special OS called TinkerOS, which is a tweaked version of Debian. Whether it becomes as well supported as Raspbian for the Raspberry Pi, we'll have to see. There's also a version of the popular Kodi media centre software for the Tinkerboard. Asus hasn't announced when it'll be out or how much it'll cost in Australia, but it is out in the UK, where it sells for £55 including VAT, around AUD$90.

CORSAIR

YOU WANTED IT ALL. HERE IT IS.

K95 RGB PLATINUM

COMPETE. DEFEAT. REPEAT.

K95 RGB PLATINUM launches CORSAIR's best-in-class keyboards into another dimension of personalization. Unleash unreal performance with CHERRY MX mechanical switches, store and playback complex macros and lighting effects to any key, and light up your mission control in spectacular full RGB with our innovative LightEdge technology.

CHERRY MX RGB SPEED | CHERRY MX RGB BROWN

BUY AT JB HI-FI

LEARN MORE AT **WWW.JBHIFI.COM.AU**

AUSTRALIA'S PREMIER PC TECH EVENT RETURNS TO MELBOURNE WITH

upgrade AUSTRALIA 5.0

BUILD, PLAY AND CREATE AT THE CAULFIELD CAMPUS OF MONASH UNIVERSITY

PC & Tech Authority, PC PowerPlay, Atomic and Hyper are joining forces once again to bring you another spectacular night of cutting edge PC technology, the latest advances in gaming and the coolest new gear around. The last Upgrade Australia event was hosted in Sydney, so now we're heading back to Melbourne with an all new show with new partners and gear. Get ready to experience the latest PC hardware, talk to experts in the field, witness live demonstrations, feast on free food and drink and stand a pretty good chance of walking away with freebies.

We know you can't wait to get your hands on the latest and greatest PC gear so jump on the website and register right away!

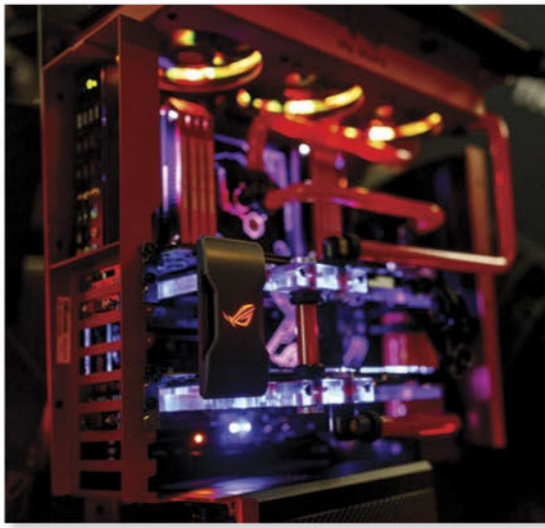
Register at: ***www.pcauthority.com.au/upgradeaustralia***

WHERE: Melbourne 's Monash University, Caulfield Campus
WHEN: May the 3rd, 6pm onwards
WHAT: Upgrade Australia 5.0, a unique PC event that sees the best hardware vendors showing off their latest and greatest technology as well as free food and drink
COST: FREE FOR ALL!

- Go hands-on with the hottest and most cutting edge computer tech
- See some of the greatest case mods in Australia
- Be the first to see demonstrations of tech that hasn't hit the market
- Experience VR in all new ways
- Eat, drink and socialise with like-minded PC enthusiasts
- Win prizes!

Visit www.pcauthority.com.au/UpgradeAustralia

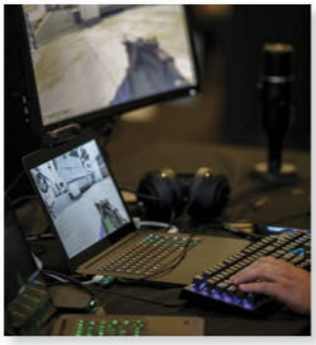
FOR MORE INFORMATION, AND HEAR MORE ABOUT THE EXCITING ATTRACTIONS COMING TO THIS BIG EVENT!



10
10
REPUBLIC OF

fractal

QNAP
QNAP



VANS

msi

BarraCuda Pro
10TB

ASUS ROG XG STATION 2

Empower laptops with ultimate gaming grunt!

^ Asus design and engineering is superb

Laptop gamers rejoice! Thanks to the huge bandwidth in Thunderbolt 3 you can now have desktop class GPU performance without having to invest in a separate desktop PC. With the Asus ROG XG Station 2, which implements this technology, you can have the thin laptop you need to travel between home, work or school and the GPU firepower necessary to play the latest games and enjoy VR gaming with no lag.

Just like the familiar process of plugging in an external hard drive, you can now connect an external GPU for when you need it, instead of carrying it around with you all the time, taking up space and weight in your laptop.

THUNDERBOLT 3 IS GO!

The huge bandwidth in Thunderbolt 3 makes this possible, with over 40Gbps available to transfer the vast amount of data between your GPU and the rest of computer. The Asus ROG XG Station 2 supports the latest Nvidia GTX 1000-series cards, even the mighty GTX 1080, as well as AMD's latest GPUs, to turn your PCI Express GPU of choice into an external Thunderbolt 3 GPU. With support for the latest GPUs, things like 4K gaming at 60 frames per second, or deep immersive virtual reality become possible - something difficult to achieve in a power and heat constrained laptop chassis alone.

A 600W 80 Plus Gold PSU provides plenty of juice for even the beefiest GPU and the Asus ROG XG Station 2 even supports putting the GPU to sleep when the Thunderbolt cable is disconnected from the computer, saving energy when your laptop isn't there.

TOO EASY

Installation is a piece of cake. Just slide open the Asus ROG XG Station 2, remove I/O plate, pop the graphics card in, connect VGA power, close the lid and plug it to a power socket and your laptop's Thunderbolt 3 port. Done. You don't even need to connect power to your notebook. PC.

You can also choose to use your laptop display if you don't have a separate monitor - it can also output directly onto your laptop's internal monitor if it utilizes either Nvidia Optimus or Intel graphics.

ASUS AURA SYNC

Got a machine that has Asus Aura Sync? The Asus ROG XG Station 2 supports it! Modify the colour of the LEDs on your GPU with a wide array of dazzling effects, just as you would on an internal GPU. On the front of the ASUS ROG XG Station 2 there's a gnarly looking Plasma Tube that crackles with electricity, letting everyone know there's loads of gaming horsepower within.

^ With looks like this, who wouldn't want this powerhouse sitting on their desk?

If you're interested in a laptop that supports the Asus ROG XG Station 2, Asus has you covered, too. Ideally Intel Kaby Lake based systems with Thunderbolt 3 support manufactured from 2017 onwards will be compliant to XG Station 2. For backward compatibility, two very portable Transformer Book – the T303UA and T305CA, also receive updates to support the Asus ROG XG Station 2. In fact, you can also use it to upgrade the GPU for gaming notebooks as well. Quite amazing.

v Asus Aura Sync compatibility makes for a spectacular appearance

< All the ports on your graphics card are easily accessible

UNRIVALED
PRO GAMING
GEAR

Tt eSPORTS
By Thermaltake

SOME GAMERS THINK THE COUCH
IS AS GOOD AS IT GETS.

BUT REAL GAMERS KNOW WHAT COMFORT IS

GT COMFORT & GT FIT SERIES

PROFESSIONAL GAMING CHAIRS

OUT NOW IN AUSTRALIA
LEARN MORE AT TTESPORTS.COM

GG GOOD GAME

Popular ABC video games program cancelled

Next Media has something of a long history with Good Game. Over the years, many former editors and deputy editors of Next Media gaming titles, including Eliot Fish, Narayan Pattison, Maurice Branscombe, Alan Moore, David Wildgoose, Bennett Ring and Daniel Wilks (and probably more that we are forgetting) have at one time or other worked behind the scenes of Australia's longest running video games show. It came as quite a shock to discover that, just three weeks before season 11 of Good Game was meant to begin, and after the show had officially been renewed and the crew were back at work readying a new series, the show had been cancelled.

"OFFICIAL STATEMENT

Sad news. After the program's summer break, two of the key presenters of Good Game announced they were leaving to pursue other opportunities.

In light of this major setback, and changes in the way audiences are choosing to get their information about gaming, the ABC has decided to end the long and successful run of the show. We plan to continue Spawn Point in a new format.

We expect to retain all the remaining Good Game team.

The ABC would like to acknowledge the wonderful work of Janet Carr and all of the Good Gamers. Any show that makes it to a 10th birthday is something to be proud of. Good Game pioneered video game TV. Its commitment and innovation has been repeatedly and appropriately awarded. The show has had a tremendous run and plenty of adventures, none of which would have happened without the ongoing love and support of you, the GG community.

Thank you."

The official statement (above) released through social media indicates that the decision to cancel the show was due to two of the hosts leaving, but given the fact that the show was successful, had already changed hosts twice before (once mid-season) and that there were two other hosts both more than capable of stepping up to the main show, this claim rings a little hollow. We reached out to an official ABC spokesperson who was unwilling or unable to clarify anything outside of the official statement.

It's always sad to see something that is good for the Australian games industry and community as a whole fall by the wayside, and even if you didn't like the show, the fact that an Australian show about video games managed to stay on the air for 10 years shows just how important and vibrant the Australian gaming community is. Janet Gaeta (nee Carr), creator of Good Game and the spinoff shows couldn't comment on the reason for the cancellation of the shows, but did have a message for everyone who watched or worked on the programs.

"Everyone has a job and Spawn Point lives to play another day. I hope it's not too long until we see gaming coverage for adults return to the ABC. Thank you to the team, industry and most of all, the viewers for the best decade of my life."

msi®

WORLD'S FIRST

7th GEN CPU GEFORCE GTX 10 SERIES
REACH NEW HEIGHTS

BEST MEETS BEST
REACH NEW HEIGHTS

For more detail:
MSI Australia &
New Zealand Notebook

GE72VR / GE62VR Apache Pro

GAMING G SERIES

GEARED WITH LATEST
7th GEN. INTEL® CORE™ i7 PROCESSOR &
GEFORCE® GTX 10 SERIES GRAPHICS

7th GEN. INTEL® CORE™ i7 PROCESSOR	WINDOWS 10 HOME / WINDOWS 10 PRO
GEFORCE® GTX 1070 / 1060 / 1050 Ti GRAPHICS	VR READY	NAHIMIC VR
AL ALLOY CHASSIS DESIGN	120HZ / 5MS GAMING DISPLAY(optional)
COOLER BOOST 4	DYNAUDIO	FULL COLOR BACKLIT STEELSERIES KEYBOARD

INTEL INSIDE® . EXTRAORDINARY PERFORMANCE OUTSIDE.

intel CORE i7 7th Gen

WHERE TO BUY

NSW

Capitol Computer	(02) 9281 8890	http://www.capitolcomputer.com.au
Wireless 1	(02) 9687 8828	http://www.wireless1.com.au
Mwave	1300 727 446	http://www.mwave.com.au
Kong Computer	1300 159 272	http://www.kongcomputers.com
JW Computers	(02) 9726 2818	http://jw.com.au
Dcomp Online	(02) 4721 3457	http://www.dcomponline.com.au
Shopping Express	(02) 8338 8899	http://www.shoppingexpress.com.au
Digital Star	(02) 8748 6888	http://www.digitalstar.com.au
PC Byte	(02) 9723 0306	http://pcbyte.com.au

VIC

Tesc	(03) 9602 3499	http://www.tesc.com.au
Scorptec Computers	(03) 9249 6000	http://www.scorptec.com.au
PC Case Gear	(03) 9560 2122	http://www.pccasegear.com
PLE Computers	(08) 9309 4771	http://www.ple.com.au
Centrecom	(03) 8311 7600	http://www.centrecom.com.au
BCC Computers	(03) 5227 6888	http://www.bcccomputers.com.au/geelongwest
CPL	(03) 9223 4288	http://www.cplonline.com.au
Prototech	(03) 5444 1980	http://www.prototech.com.au
Umart	(07) 3369 3928	http://www.umart.com.au

NEW ZEALAND

JUSTLAPTOPS	(09) 442 2066	http://www.justlaptops.co.nz
Computer Lounge	(09) 368 4818	http://www.computerlounge.co.nz
Playtech	(09) 415 1020	http://www.playtech.co.nz

QLD

Umart	(07) 3369 3928	http://www.umart.com.au
Computer Function	(07) 3720 4777	http://www.computerfunction.com.au
Computer Alliance	(07) 3421 3200	http://www.computeralliance.com.au
GameDude Computers	(07) 3387 1500	http://www.gamedude.com

SA

Getright Computers	(08) 8231 0622	http://www.getright.com.au
IT Warehouse	(08) 8296 3211	http://www.itwarehouse.com.au
ALLNEEDS	(08) 8211 8661	http://www.allneeds.com.au

WA

Affordable Laptops	(08) 9536 8500	http://www.affordablelaptops.com.au
PLE Computers	(08) 9309 4771	http://www.ple.com.au
Austin Computers	(08) 9202 0100	http://austin.net.au

Intel, the Intel Logo, Intel Inside, Intel Core, and Core Inside are trademarks of Intel Corporation in the U.S. and/or other countries.

COOL INNOVATION

SMELL... THE (ALMOST) FINAL VR FRONTIER...

Because of course we have to be able to smell everything we do in virtual reality. And feel every impact.

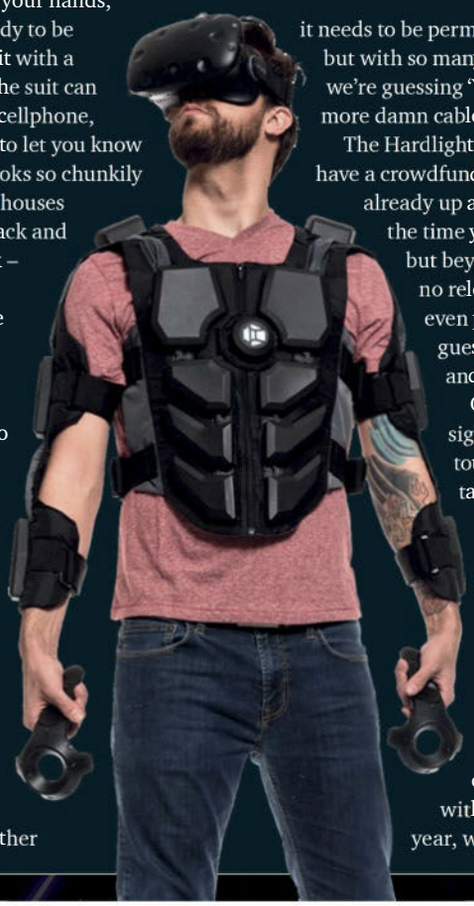
Virtual reality is already one of the most immersive technologies on the market today. Room-scale VR can make you feel as though you're anywhere from the depths of space to the surface of Tatooine, in ruined cities from ages past, or truly surrounded by swarms of zombies. With cameras tracking your full body motion, and controllers in your hands, you're practically right there, in the middle of a whole range of different experiences.

But for all of that, there are a number of companies that want to ramp up that sense of full body immersion. Beyond merely seeing and hearing your 360-degree environment.

Hardlight VR has just started a wait-list for what it calls the Hardlight Suit. And, impressively, it's actually a kind of funky, almost bulletproof vest-style garment that integrates not only haptic feedback as you move, but also tracking of your torso and limbs. Combined with room-scale VR and motion trackers in your hands, it allows your entire body to be present in-game. Get hit with a sword in a game, and the suit can vibrate – just like your cellphone, or console controller – to let you know where. The reason it looks so chunkily ballistic is that the suit houses 16 different zones to track and deliver haptic feedback – there are eight on your chest and stomach, one on each shoulder, and one each on upper and lower arms. Presumably the last two (we're guessing based on pictures of the suit) are on the back.

But what happens when the in-game sword hits you on the leg?

> "funky, almost bulletproof vest-style garment that integrates haptic feedback and tracking of your torso and limbs"



It comes in a one-size-fits-most single design, with a mess of straps for adjustment. It also uses a 9V power supply, and USB2/3 for connectivity – the product page *(www.hardlightvr.com/faqs)* is a little vague on whether it needs to be permanently connected, but with so many zones to track, we're guessing 'Yes, that's one more damn cable to trip over'.

The Hardlight Suit will probably have a crowdfunding project already up and running by the time you read this, but beyond that there's no release details or even pricing, but we're guessing 'not this year' and 'not cheap'.

Okay, so that's sight, sound, and touch well and truly taken care of, but I know you're wondering... 'What about smell?' Well, like they said in the old days, I'm glad you asked.

Ubisoft may have joked about combining smell with gaming last year, when it hyped up its Nosulus Rift... thing, to help promote South Park: The Fractured But Whole at least year's E3. But assuming you even wanted to play through the constant, nausea-inducing smells on offer, it's hardware that's little more than a gimmick – it will never hit retail.

What will likely hit are a number of other products that are designed to let you smell what you see. Feelreal *(http://feelreal.com)* is a mask that comes in two versions – one for current headsets, and one full-head model designed with work with smartphone VR – and promises that it "maximizes your virtual reality presence and allows you to explore virtual worlds using smells and simulated effects of wind, heat, water mist, and vibration." Yep, not only can you smell the fresh (or otherwise) air, you can feel how hot or cold it is, thanks to built-in misters and microheaters.

Because, of course you want a microheater strapped to your face. And it also vibrates, because... why not. At least the Feelreal models work via Bluetooth, so that's a plus, and they even come with software – The Feelreal Player, which gave us a laugh, at least – that lets users program a full sensory experience to go along with

▲ **(top) Want to look like you just stepped out of a Daft Punk video? Feelreal's got you covered.**

(above) We've ordered the Ohroma for the men's bathroom at PCPP HQ.

your favourite film.

Of course, if your favourite film happens to be a porn film… well, you're covered there too, because of course pornographers are all over VR.

The Ohroma mask is the brainchild of cam site CamSoda, and it offers such tantalising aromas as 'private parts', 'panties', and 'body odor'. It works via Bluetooth connected to your phone, and the software can even be tailored by both the user, and whomever is in front of the camera. But the smell of the act of sex is only a small part of the equation for this brave new sensory frontier. In an interview with Motherboard, CamSoda president Daron Lundeen pointed out that a lot of the shows weren't just about sex – the models might cook, or drink some wine, and Ohroma can reinforce even those basic interactions.

"Scent is something that brings back memories, it just adds depth and color to our work," Lundeen said in the interview. "It makes perfect sense to let a model create that in her own room."

Tune in next month when I am no doubt horrified at the future of taste-masks. *DAVID HOLLINGWORTH* PC

Crossing the Threshold

Disney believes that Star Wars is the ultimate power in the pop-culture universe. Yet deep within this killer franchise there is a fatal flaw...

Another year, another Star Wars sequel, and another sense of lingering dissatisfaction and unease that is difficult to articulate. Fortunately, we have gifted critics like Rich Evans to help crystallise our thoughts; to remind us that while the Star Wars universe appears to be immense, it's actually quite small. Star Wars is the story of Luke Skywalker leaving the family farm and going on an adventure. Everything tacked on to that will always be fan-fiction.

Ah, fan-fiction. Back in the '90s the burgeoning internet allowed this literary genre to proliferate like never before, and at first it all seemed like a good idea. In those heady days many of us honestly believed that new voices and talents could bring our favourite characters and situations to life like never before. But a perfectly-formed story doesn't need extra chapters any more than a working machine needs any more moving parts.

Even when fan-fiction is good, it's inessential. And when it's bad, it's horrid: "It was a dark and stormy night. Naruto was fucking Sonic."

If a movie is competently executed and conforms to a coherent story structure it can stand the test of time. Films like Commando, Rambo First Blood: Part II, and David Lynch's Dune are just as watchable today as when they were first released *(I guess that's one way of putting it - Ed.)*. The Phantom Menace, Attack of the Clones, and Revenge of the Sith are not. The Force Awakens has aged even worse.

Star Wars films are no longer stories, but spectacles – amusement park rides on celluloid. It's a great way to make a buck, but a terrible way to build a brand.

These flicks are slapped together, incoherent, advertised to within an inch of their lives, and designed to make a profit the very first week after launch. Does that business model remind you of anything? It should. Whether they're aware of it or not, the suits at the Disney Corporation are creating and marketing films as if they were video games.

Don't get me wrong – video games are great. But a handful of very, very rare exceptions notwithstanding, video games are fundamentally ephemeral. Their appeal stems from the innate human craving for novelty.

> "the suits at the Disney Corporation are creating and marketing films as if they were video games"

Recall that the video game economy currently revolves around an axis of waifus and loot crates – presumably because the world isn't quite ready for full-on pornographic gambling. As such, in the perfect Star Wars game you wouldn't play as a Jedi or a Sith – you'd play as a Hutt. As an amoral crime lord of the Outer Rim you'd enslave and/or employ dancing girls, spice (drug) smugglers, and bounty hunters, and manage your workforce by dragging and dropping under-performing vassals into your Rancor pit. The loot crates would be stolen shipments of imperial cargo, to be earned by interminable marathon play sessions, or bought for modest amounts of premium currency (On a related note, Gearbox boss Randy Pitchford is to be commended for publicising a Subreddit full of Battleborn smut; I expect the 2K share price to soar as a result).

If they had their production pipeline sorted, Disney would follow the Pixar example of ruthlessly iterating quality stories for their movies, and then flogging branded ephemera. But if the films themselves are ephemera, then those annual samey sequels can only erode the brand. Consider the legacies of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, Guitar Hero, and Call of Duty.

Perhaps this is all the master plan of some shadowy Disney executive who believes that by destroying Star Wars he can free up Disney's movie budget and bring back Tron.

It's a dark time for Star Wars, but the suits are not solely to blame. The creators and consumers of content form a symbiont circle; you must understand this. The fan-fiction addict lives his life like porcine livestock. For a pig consuming nothing but oats can only see one path to happiness: more oats. He cannot see the world beyond the walls of his pen. He cannot even imagine it.

Ephemera has its place, and that place is gaming. A Papers, Please clone starring a Small Moff Tarkin, a Wing Commander clone starring a dashing young Ensign Ackbar; this is the calibre of disposable spin-offs we deserve.

Did you ever hear the tragedy of Rogue One the film? The tragedy is that it wasn't a game instead. PC

JAMES COTTEE got his start in games journalism writing slashfic for an unofficial PlayStation magazine.

fractal design

Performance without restrictions

Define C series

Best Laid Plans

Because a throne is only a bench covered with velvet.

Does representing diversity in games really boil down to two blokes kissing in your favourite AAA title? Surely the potential for a wider range of people to participate in making games is more exciting. This is, of course, why GenXX often focuses on initiatives like Failbetter Games' Fundbetter program, as well as finding supportive structures and communities. It's too easy to say, "If you want to see yourself in a game, make a game," dismissing real barriers to entry.

I briefly looked into GDC Assist this year, fantasising about sitting in a chair in San Francisco and letting a pure beam of inspiring game audio advice lock onto my forehead. Did I apply? No. Why? The kids are on school holidays. I'm busy enough just making sure everyone has sunscreen and a hat. Do I expect the world to revolve around my parenting responsibilities? No. But, this month's column intends to provide insight into one way a studio capitalised on their process.

I've been playing Nuclear Throne by Vlambeer. Combining the chaos of bullet hell with the caution required for a roguelike structure, it deserves every word of the critical acclaim it received. It's beautifully balanced and allows for a neat range of playstyles. Much of the game's success may also be attributed Vlambeer's streaming on Twitch.

Designer, Rami Ismail, told PCPP, "For about two-and-a-half years, we did two livestreams per week. Each episode was approximately four hours long and we'd have wildly varying viewership based on Twitch promotion, hype for upcoming characters or features, as well as how big the community was at that point. We'd have thousands of viewers for a good show, and far more for a great one. The livestream helped us communicate with the core of the audience/community, spread information and get feedback, also forming a huge part of the game's sales."

I was interested in how the game was distributed alongside livestreams and Ismail's answer was surprising and clever, "The game was available via Steam, Humble, and in a world first, by subscribing to our channel on Twitch. During development, it was slightly more expensive, to ensure people would only buy it if they were interested in a WIP game requiring feedback." Vlambeer increases the value of their product and community, while purchasers opt into a special and exclusive experience.

> "skill and mastery make a stream interesting, and it's fun seeing people fail too"

Ismail also explained several insights into how designers interacted with player feedback. As one example, "Taking feedback from your core community is a risk if you're not thinking about who they are. One of the most common criticisms was that the first level was too easy. Eventually, we increased the difficulty, but noticed that there was more fighting on our forums. New players' complaints clashed with our core community of expert players, and we had to find a way to resolve that, in the form of a shortcut through the first two worlds."

Vlambeer then gave 50,000 copies to people who already owned the game to gift to others, bringing more inexperienced players into the mix. Nuclear Throne relies on building proficiency and, as Ismail said, "You need to design your game to output in such a way that the player/streamer can focus on being themselves and communicating, and that it works to do some of the heavy lifting. In Nuclear Throne, the show of skill and mastery goes a long way to making a stream interesting, and there's a fair bit of fun in seeing people fail too."

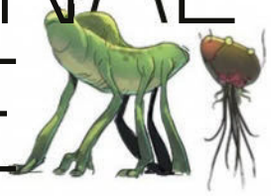
It could be argued that, as Nuclear Throne wasn't Vlambeer's first game, they were able to build on community momentum brought over from previous projects. Perhaps they also arrived on Twitch at a lucky time for the platform's popularity. So, while this approach may not yield similar results for a new developer, it's also clear that Vlambeer streamed thoughtfully, in a way that embraced experimentation. I'm increasingly sure that all learning creates the building blocks people need to get involved in game development and that experience is never wasted.

As a last example, one bizarre moment on this family holiday, in which my time is almost exclusively spent "being a mum, not a game developer," was when I tweeted something my 7 year old said and it went viral. I hadn't intended the tweet for that purpose, but I can certainly discern why it happened. Could I replicate this with something to promote a game project? Likely not, but maybe. When you're short on time, it's "maybe" that counts. Hopefully something in this column sparked a "maybe moment" to inspire greater efficiency in your process. PC

MEGHANN O'NEILL is so efficient she is writing this page while eating breakfast for lunch again. It's a busy time of year.

METABOX
PC
&TECH
AUTHORITY
RECOMMENDED
From $1199
METABOX
The Worlds Most Powerful Custom Laptops
www.metabox.com.au/store

THE ETERNAL DOCTRINE



The return of the 90s cult hit Star Control is almost upon us. We talk to Stardock founder **BRAD WARDELL** about what makes this series special, and how he's creating a 64-bit reboot for a new generation...

WHO BRAD WARDELL
WHERE STARDOCK
WHY STAR CONTROL: ORIGINS

Created by Fred Ford and Paul Reiche III, and published by Accolade in 1992, Star Control II is a high watermark in the history of PC gaming. Combining space exploration, gripping starship combat, and first contact with a galaxy full of oddball aliens, it is fondly remembered by a generation of PC gamers.

The franchise was recently bought by Stardock, and a reboot is in the works. When we recently caught up with Stardock CEO Brad Wardell the first thing he wanted to impress on us was the magnitude of the production. "It's definitely our biggest project ever."

His team is currently working on the planetary exploration aspect of the game, where you can send a shuttle down to hunt for resources. As revealed in the recent teaser trailer, what was an abstract, 2D game mode in SC2 is now rendered in full 3D.

"From an engineering point of view it's an interesting challenge, because this game has many different parts to it, but it has to be seamless. No-one wants to sit there and wait for a planet to load. You need to be able to go to the spherical planet, land on it, do stuff, have interesting adventures, and then be able to leave in one swoop, and it has to work on a reasonably powerful machine."

To this end Star Control: Origins is being built with Nitrous, the powerful 64-bit engine from Oxide that made possible the spectacular action in Ashes of the Singularity. "People love Star Control, and people ask: 'Why hasn't anyone taken that basic formula?' Well, it's because Star Control is actually several games put into one. You have the planet exploration, you have the ship battles, and you have the alien story part, you have the star system exploration... it's a lot of different what we call 'graphical scenes.'

"Most engines today are designed with one scene, altogether. A typical Unreal game is a single scene. Civilization: a single scene. Even Ashes of the Singularity is only a single scene. So when you're switching between these very different views, you're bouncing between lots of hardware resources, because you can almost accomplish anything if you throw enough hardware at it, versus what Nitrous brings to the table."

Specifically, a mass amount of multi-threaded support. "For example, if you have at least a four-core machine, we can do all kinds of stuff to all the different scenes simultaneously, while the player's playing, without it slowing down the main game. That allows you to seamlessly transition to a planet, or back to a battle, or to another completely different scene. From a technical point of view, that's what makes Nitrous exciting for us."

> Star Control II had gravity wells... now we have weapons that can increase gravitational pull, and you can set traps for opponents

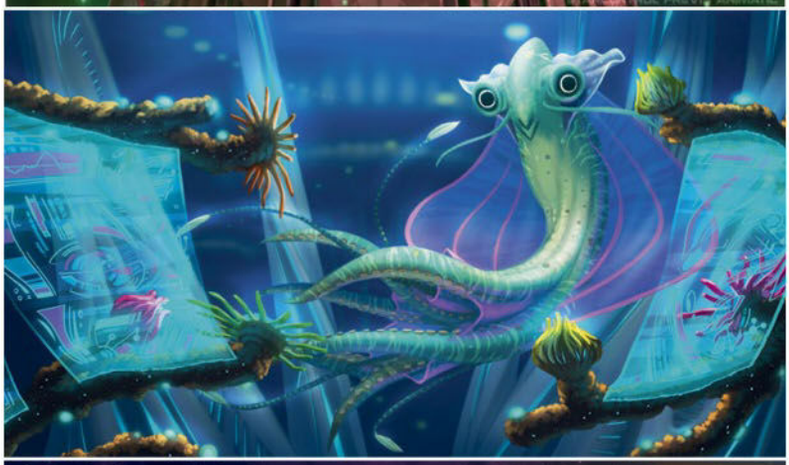
The ship combat in the early Star Control games was a riff on Spacewar – one-on-one battles on a 2D plane with a gravity well. Early in production, Brad's team decided they wanted to try something a tad more ambitious for Origins. "We wanted to be able to show fleet combat. So your ship was one of several ships in a fleet battling it out almost like a MOBA. Visually, it was very satisfying. But from a gameplay point of view we ended up throwing it out. It might make for a good game; it did not make for a good Star Control game. Because what happened was, in single-player, if the AI was dumb, which it was at the start of this, the player was just super-frustrated, because they could end up losing a battle because their team-mates flying the other ships were stupid." They persisted with this paradigm for a while, working under the belief that once they got the AI working it would all fall into place. But it didn't work out that way.

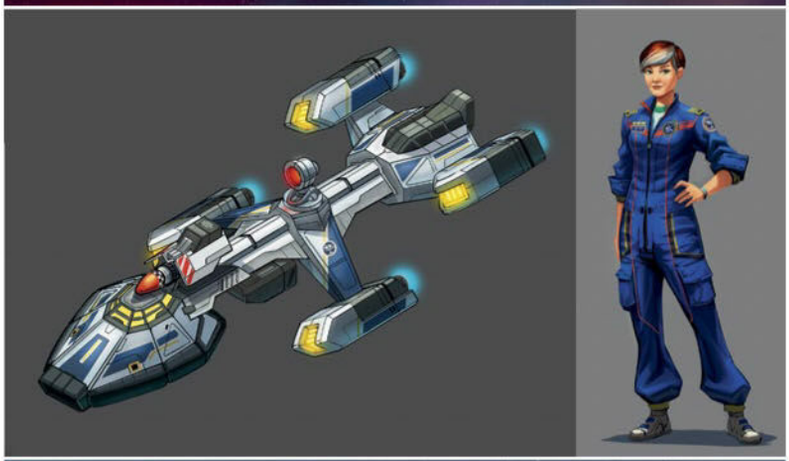
"What happened was that once the AI got smart, the player ended up being relatively irrelevant to the outcome of the battle [laughs]. Because the AI could just take care of most of the battle for them. So we ultimately have come back to the one-on-one ship design that's much more like the original Star Control. Except with updated graphics." This isn't a bad thing. SC2 wasn't just a solo space RPG; the stand alone multi-player mode was immensely satisfying, a knife-edge duel. "At the end of the day what makes Super Melee fun is that it is battle of very decisive skill."

In SC2 the ships of each race had unique abilities, like fighter squadrons, or space marines that could board enemy ships. The Nitrous engine makes far more exotic weapons possible. "We can have weapons that do interesting things gravitationally, on the fly. Star Control II had gravity wells, but they were pre-canned. But now we can have weapons that can greatly increase the gravitational pull at a particular point, and you can start to set traps and stuff for your opponents.

"Another thing that's really fun is having weapons that can basically, reproduce. So you've got to kill the guy, your opponent, or he will eventually overwhelm you with this junk. We really couldn't have done that back in '92 without the entire simulation coming apart."

As for the story, Star Control: Origins will be a complete reboot, with all-new aliens and an all-new adventure. "It would not be realistic to do a sequel 25 years later. Not to mention Star Control II kinda tied things up." Another factor is that part of the appeal of the franchise is the first contact





experience. “If you already know Star Control, and you’re meeting the Ur-Quan, it doesn’t matter what they say. You know they’re the bad guys.”

When designing these new aliens Brad’s team wanted to stay as far away as possible from your cliché Star Trek-style humanoid aliens, and make them genuinely peculiar beings to interact with. “For example, we have an alien that is purely aquatic. It’s water-based. Because we thought, statistically if there’s intelligent life there’s probably a decent chance it’s aquatic.

“Then we also have ones that survive off of the energy provided by stars. It’s literally a space creature that lives in space and has evolved through that, over the aeons.” In the space combat mode this race is its own ship, rendered and behaving as an intricate swarm, like a school of space-fish.

“Then we got some that are a little bit more traditional, that are slug-based. That look like slugs [*laughs*]. Or other strange types. But we’ve tried not to have humanoids.”

As in SC2, the player’s mothership will be modular, upgradeable, and customisable, but this time it won’t be an exotic Precursor vessel – it will be late 21st Century human tech. “At the beginning of the game you really need to rely on your alien allies and friends that you meet to help because your ship is just so… embarrassing. And by the end your ship is just a butt-kicker.”

The conversation system is being built with some of the same technology behind the diplomacy in Sid Meier’s Civilization V. “We knew that we were going to end up with a lot of writing, so we decided to make it so that the aliens are procedurally generated, and their mouths will move based on what the voice actor says. Rather than some poor animator having to manipulate the whole thing.”

Cracked.com writer Chris Bucholz has been working on the story full time for three years now, and Brad can’t even estimate how long it would take to finish every last side-quest. “If someone just wants to beeline through the main thing, that’s probably like 40 hours. But to find everything? No-one actually knows.

“I can tell you who doesn’t love this game: the people in QA.”

On top of all that content, Star Control: Origins will also come with an editor that will allow users to create and share their own space oddities on Steamworks. “So if someone wants to make a Star Control 2 or something, I suppose they could [laughs].”

One of the most memorable aspects of SC2 was the music, all of which was created in the MOD file format popular at the time. For Origins, Brad hired the Finnish composer who came up with the distinctive themes for the Thraddash and the Yehat. “We actually are working with Riku Nuottajärvi, who did most of the best-known themes from Star Control back in the day. He was actually just a kid back then. He’s obviously an adult now. He’s handling pretty much all the music in the new Star Control.”

All the component parts that make Star Control work seem to be in place, but in parting Brad wanted to stress on us that Origins is still quite a ways off. “I don’t want anyone getting their hopes up that this is coming out in a couple months. We’re still targeting probably some time this fall, but we’ll have to see. We’re not in any hurry. I mean, it’s Star Control. It needs to be done right.”

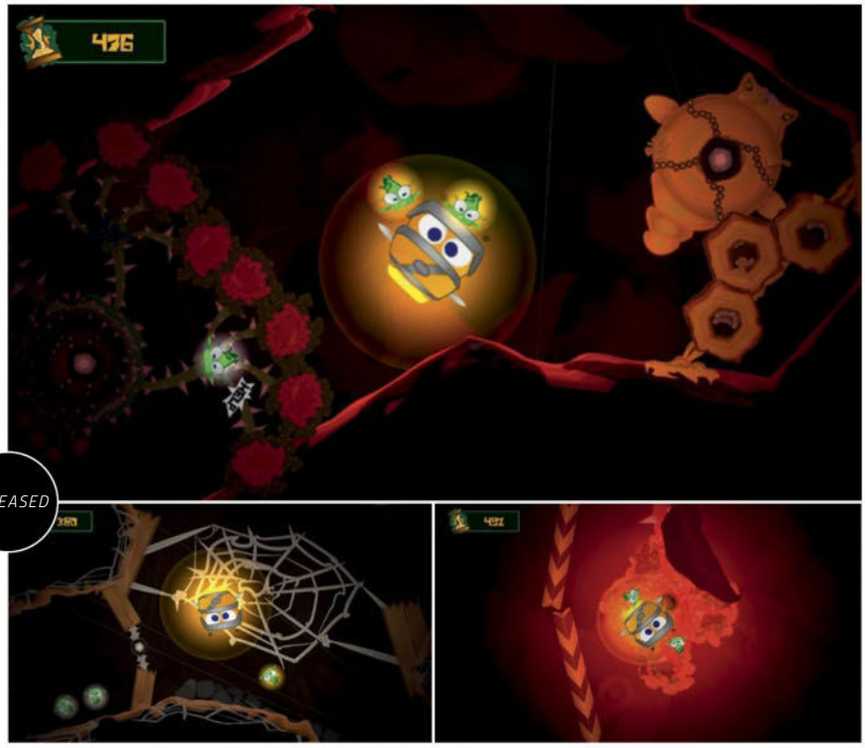
JAMES COTTEE PC

A Collection Aside

Whether you're burrowing into the ground to escape radiation or basking in your luxury penthouse, **MEGHANN O'NEILL** has found games to occupy your time. These are stories about sadness and planetary colonisation, perhaps a cautionary tale about having too many babies, at least too close together. Feel everything from relaxing FMV to obsessive micromanagement as you explore the contextual appropriateness of design choices. Just don't eat the fruit.

LIL BIG INVASION

DEVELOPER ANDREAS BRITTEN
PRICE $5
store.steampowered.com/app/491240



RELEASED

> dammit, I just need you to flutter still for a few seconds while I charge my light

My kids loved playgrounds when they were little, one in particular. It was so massive that we rarely survived a visit without someone getting lost and crying, usually me. One day, I met a mum with quintuplets, all five of whom were wearing bright red hats. She was totally just sipping her coffee, keeping a vague count of her brightly coloured progeny as they played. She was the smartest, most relaxed, mum I've ever met. When I accepted a key for Lil Big Invasion I was expecting a puzzle game but what I got was a very cathartic experience.

Lecturing one's children over getting lost isn't really the done thing, after all. But dammit, green flies, I just need you to flutter still for a few seconds while I charge my light. Flutter. Still. But, no, you're all going helplessly around in circles, getting trapped by foliage and not even remembering which direction we were going in. I just need a damn moment to flip this switch and then we can all bask in Mummy's warm glow as I herd you to safety. Again. Why are you down here in the dark anyway? There is clearly a sign that says, "no flies."

The game sets a remarkable pace, while still sitting firmly within the puzzle genre. Your diminishing light lends problem solving a sense of urgency and you have to think fast in order to remain in control of the situation. Challenges get incrementally harder, too. You're initially just managing wayward flies, charging points and switches, then wormholes (passages created by worms) and wind. Eventually, they compound, like with wind blowing flies into sticky spider webs. Charging through mines is also a sure path to getting horrendously lost.

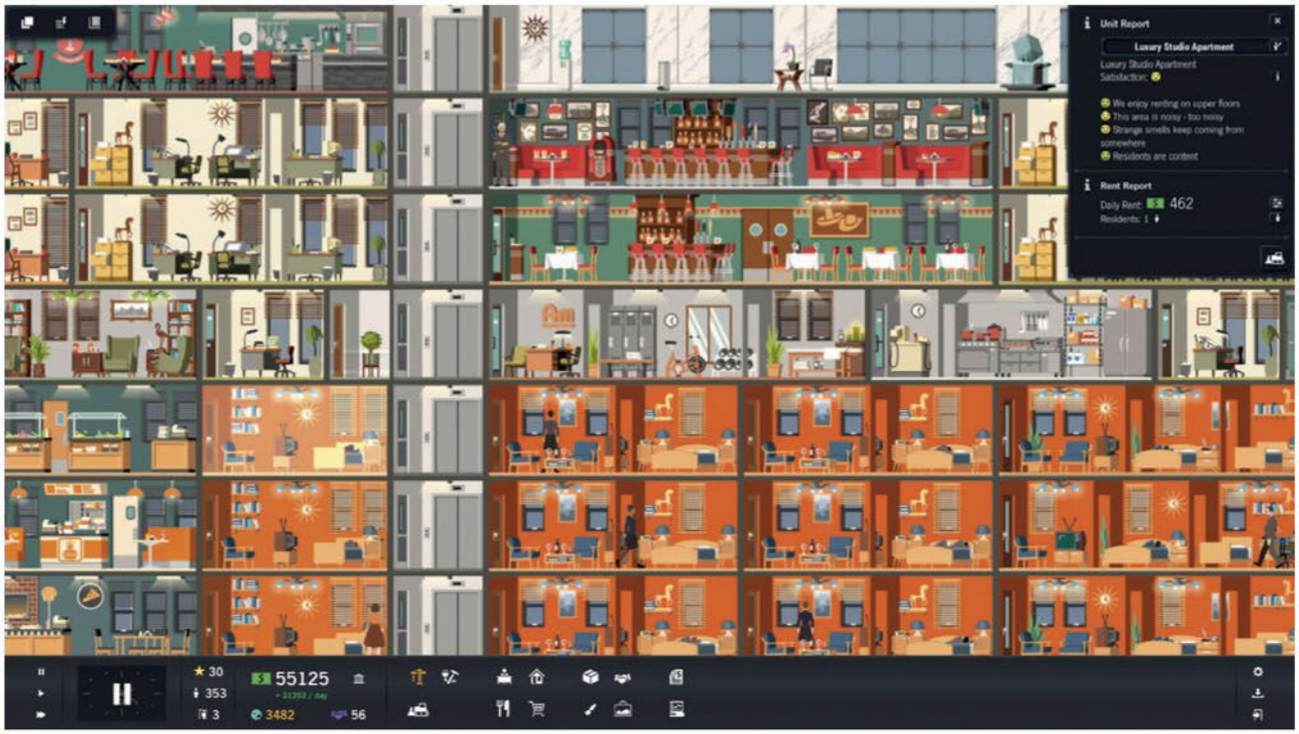
I nearly gave up at the first boss, who is a whirly, spikey plant-monstrosity that you have to defeat because it traps your flies. The developer provided me with a few hints about its movement but I didn't actually need them. I just needed to take a break. There's something about that "walk away and come back later" feeling with games that highlights a thoughtful challenge. It's as if the designer intends the tricky bits for players who are fresh. There's an odd sense of needing to play while at your best which matches the parental exhaustion Lil Big Invasion evokes.

Similarly, and this is going to sound weird, I found my character's facial expressions very motivating. The art is simple and too brown, but the cross-eyed ridiculousness as my light started to sputter, changing to steely determination while charging, reminded me of my sacred duty to the flies.

A few minor inconveniences aside, like the mouse interface feeling a little too loose, where a touch screen might have better suited play, and I found I was really enjoying more and more of the same. Within the five worlds, you are scored for each mine based on speed and flies rescued.

Ultimately, I started loving Lil Big Invasion most of all when I realised I could progress even if I didn't collect all of the flies in each mine, if I could forget that they were alone in the dark, anyway, crying for help. I mean, I'm sure even the quintuplet mum left one or two of her children at the playground occasionally. She had spares. *(This just got real dark - Ed.)*.

This is a game parents will intimately understand and enjoy yelling at but, thankfully, imperfection is also built in. If Freda the Fly got eaten by a spider, well, the rest of us escaped anyway. Mummy needs a nap.



PROJECT HIGHRISE

DEVELOPER KASEDO GAMES
PRICE $20
www.kasedogames.com/projecthighrise

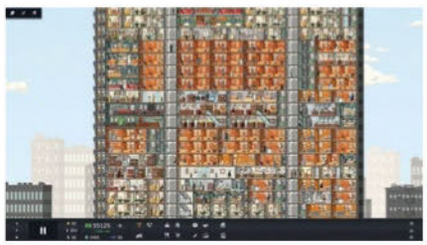
In Theme Hospital, do you remember how things never quite fit? You had a floor plan that was maybe 13 by 31, and rooms that were 7 or 5 squares wide. So, make them slightly larger? Bah. I'm too efficient for that. Fill in the gaps with a bathroom? Maybe. I don't know why, but I love making impossibly-sized pieces work together. Project Highrise, and its many interacting rooms, scratches my strange itch, as I arrange everything upwards, from a network of one square electrical closets to massive, two-story shopping malls.

The experience is not entirely what I expected from the screenshots and elevator pitch. I mean, it looks like a game where you place offices, flats, shops and unique locations, then watch the resulting simulation play out. And it is exactly that. But a combination of economic factors and the structure of how feedback is provided makes this an unusually stress free process. Like, your net gain or loss is only updated at midnight, meaning I played slowly and cautiously. Nearly everything you place earns for you and it's difficult to fail, beyond simply accumulating money more slowly.

Indeed, I usually suffer from wanting to constantly restart in these kinds of games, to try for a more optimal opening. I played my very first game for absolutely ages because I felt as if I understood perfect play instantly, in an incremental way. Yes, a tenant will move out if they aren't happy, but you can see a list of everything they need before you rent the space. You could try to cut costs by not providing a copy service, for example, but it's far more beneficial to provide what one business requires, then target all the others who also benefit from it.

As such, the opening of the game is modest. You're balancing small legal and insurance firms with coffee shops and studio apartments. I don't know why people don't want to walk across the street for lunch, get some fresh air, but I'll capitalise on it, why not? Starter rooms require electricity, water and/or phone, and you manage cables from closets that stack vertically. To further connect floors, stairs are cheaper to maintain and elevators will frequently break, requiring a maintenance office, but people will only climb a little before complaining.

What really nurtures the "one more floor" feeling, and you can make your tower more than 100 stories high, is that better tenants have prerequisites, lots of them. To build the headquarters of an international banking firm, I needed an executive club and lots of medium tier financial offices in the building. To attract the latter, I needed a range of large restaurants, shops and services. To keep HQ happy, I installed helicopter and limousine charter. And this is only business. Examining the list of requirements, from dog walking to fashion outlets, for high tier residential apartments is exhausting.



Probably my only criticism is that I'm not sure Project Highrise is incredibly replayable. I'd certainly like to try to build a snooty building full of luxury lofts and jewellery stores, but I'm not sure how that's possible, given all the groundwork that needs to be done first. You may circumvent some of the dependencies; and specialise, if you can accumulate buzz, which provides a range of temporary buffs; and influence, allowing consultants for art, politics and operations. But, you really need all of these and more, before any of the really great rooms become available.

Kasedo Games has, however, published an easy to follow modding guide and people are adding everything from car dealerships to Wally, which makes perfect sense. I absolutely love the minimalist art style, too, with its colour-coding and faint variation, but it can get samey after 30 floors, even if you're popping in custom lobbies and art spaces. But there are several scenarios to attempt if you need a different challenge. As for me, organising 4, 5, 6, 7 tile long rooms made me inordinately satisfied. I suppose I could mod a bathroom into any blank space.

KARAMBOLA

DEVELOPER AGATA NAWROT
PRICE $5
holypangolin.itch.io/karambola

RELEASED

A karambola is a starfruit. Who knew? Presumably, the person with one for a head. "Lonely fruit and vegetables with emotional problems need your help," is one hell of an elevator pitch and Karambola delivers what it promises. When your ginger root, squash and many other fresh foods are plagued by bad thoughts, finding solutions makes them vibrantly happy. Think of it as a tiny Samorost 3, but with puzzles that actually make sense most of the time. You have to experiment and then employ the delicious, juicy brain inside of your orange for a head.

The mechanics and unusual story support some really lovely art. My favourite level featured a red bush setting and some musical instruments. It's a combination of line drawing and gentle watercolour. I found the game's imaginative nature engaged me quite uniquely. I wanted to know why the cat sitting on the frightened fennel person's lap didn't have a blueberry head. It's all about aesthetic choices, like in a seedy bar with pictures on the wall you suddenly realise are chopped up people, uh, fruit, uh, people.

So, what is Karambola? Maybe it's a healthy eating program, exposing us to a rainbow of nutritious foods. Certainly, I felt both hungry and guilty about it when I'd finished playing. Or, it could be a demonstration of how to break the cycle of intrusive thinking. I mean, who can't relate to being an alcoholic dragon fruit with dark thoughts about throwing a drink right through your head? One way or another, I initially played this 30 minute experience for free, then gave the designer a donation. It was both more disturbing and lovely than I had imagined.

DE-VOID

DEVELOPER PULSETENSE GAMES
PRICE $8
www.pulsetense.com/de-void

RELEASED

I love a good sci-fi mystery, me. Give me colonising a prehistoric, Earth-like planet with restricted areas, intelligence leaks and weird robots, any day. Not to mention the copious warnings about empathy and to report to the lab if you are experiencing ominous sexual symptoms. There are significant criticisms to make about De-Void, but I found it thought-provoking, anyway. It's a walking sim where the main purpose of movement is to collect the next piece of story, but where levels also engaged my imagination through their apparent incongruousness.

In the early moments of the game, narrative exposition comes thick and fast, mostly via a procession of abandoned computers and as official, or personal, correspondence. Forget patching up The Hab with a tarp and gaffer tape, like in The Martian. These colonists are inhabiting a massive metal fortress which appears to be only corridors and empty rooms, until you find a mobile device apparently advertising a neon, busy future planned here. Soon, you're forced outwards into a desert with nothing in it. Picture Quest for Glory 2 with no oasis or tree to hug.

Eventually, I found the intended trail in a jungle which had some surprisingly great futuristic caravans and intriguing discussion about Planet Loss Syndrome. I also picked up a bunch of flasks and circuit boards, before pointlessly rotating and putting them down again. De-Void feels as if someone has created an incredible level and someone else has created an incredible story. Then, the story has been parcelled out only to make you walk the level. I'd recommend this to narrative and level designers interested in the importance of how their disciplines intersect, or don't.

THE BUNKER

DEVELOPER WALES INTERACTIVE
PRICE $20
www.walesinteractive.com/the-bunker

As someone precisely old enough to have been traumatised by Cold War fiction, as well as briefly excited by the original rise of full motion video in games, The Bunker is (almost) exactly what I wanted it to be. It's like Phantasmagoria's Stranger Things, in that it provides nostalgic audiences with an idealised memory, while also being firmly its own, coherent experience. The acting and visuals are better than teenage-me would have believed possible. I do suspect, however, that she would have been baffled by gameplay and (possibly) disappointed in a way present-me isn't.

I had to go and watch a Let's Play of Phantasmagoria to check that it was actually just an adventure game, with FMV. The Bunker is (nearly) entirely a movie, with occasional Telltale-style interactions and a couple of small choices to make. You can read one of three books to your dying mother, or scour every document and map on the wall, but that's the extent of your role, as player. The term "interactive movie" didn't originally refer to modern games with lots of cutscenes. It was the potentially non-linear delivery of actual movie chunks.

Recently, Her Story explored this structure, with clips being organised into (almost) any order, the narrative unfolding regardless of your route through it. Being a crime drama, it relied on reading facial expressions, so implementation of another art style would have been less effective. In The Bunker, you're born on the day the world ends and have spent thirty years in the company of an increasingly paranoid group of (mostly) civilians. Although you're the last person remaining, an old mystery surfaces through flashbacks as you fight for your survival.

> "entirely a movie, with occasional interactions and a couple of small choices to make"

The story is tight and the scope works well, over a couple of hours. If you remember an object being mentioned, you can bet it was important, there's no place for meaningless detail. I found myself wanting to read everything just to learn more, so much is left unsaid. Of course, the character is preoccupied with his daily routine, checking for radiation and carefully consuming food, until he is forced out of the literally two rooms that comprise his world. Thematically, this is a tale of survival, fear, infantilisation and other things, based on your interpretation of events.

RELEASED

Playing this in the same month as De-Void, I paused to consider what story-based games can actually gain from having a world to walk around in. Ultimately, I think context is everything. The Bunker allows you to simply travel to the next place with one click, but it does show a desperate place from evocative camera angles. It also both doesn't invite the player to explore, nor waste their time doing so. Why is this a game and not a movie? It could certainly work as something you'd see at the Sundance Festival, without the personal pressure light interactivity brings.

I also think that this story, with its explicit faces and non-linear moments, suit FMV game presentation. But, just be aware of what you're buying. I played The Bunker in bed with my laptop and that was lovely. I would also have been happy to play at my desk if the few, quite clever, puzzles had been developed further. Could it have been more of an adventure game? Yes. Did it work anyway? Absolutely. But, wait. Can you hear those sirens? Get to the community shelter and retraumatise yourself with the best take on alt-80s post-apocalypse I've seen in a while.

10 to Watch

Stygian: Reign of the Old Ones

DEVELOPER CULTIC GAMES
PUBLISHER CULTIC GAMES
DUE 2017
stygianthegame.com

1

▼ Cthulhu no longer slumbers. He has stirred from his sleep in sunken R'lyeh to inspire a number of games, ranging from reprints of tabletop classics to a slew of video games. Stygian, a turn-based RPG that looks like it was drawn by a mad Edward Gorey and has really whet the appetite of the Call of Cthulhu players in the PCPP bunkers. Characters go mad, madness affects skills and changes conversation choices. Permanent injuries are risked every fight. More like this please.

Monster VR Awakens

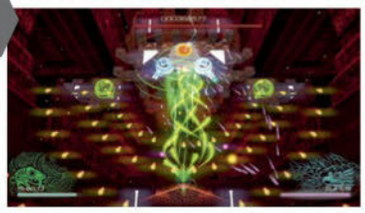
DEVELOPER FIGHT4DREAM LIMITED
PUBLISHER FIGHT4DREAM LIMITED
DUE EARLY ACCESS
vrmonsterawakens.com

▲ You're a giant monster. You smash cities and eat the inhabitants. These inhabitants look as though they have taken a holiday from Minecraft to come visit the big city. That appears to have been a mistake. Think first-person Rampage, or those excellent smashing sections in Hulk: Ultimate Destruction. It looks like the perfect tool for taking out work frustrations. What could be more relaxing than destroying some buildings and eating some cops?

2

3

Pawarumi



DEVELOPER MANUFACTURE43
PUBLISHER MANUFACTURE43
DUE 2017
pawarumi.com

A vertically scrolling space shooter set in an alternate future pre-Columbian universe. Aside from the flashy, Aztec-inspired art, Pawarumi will also feature some pretty clever mechanics. The ship is equipped with three godly weapons, and knowing when to use each is crucial for survival; shooting the right weapon can heal the player, do double damage or charge the super attack that combines the effects of all three weapons. We've been hankering for a new scrolling shooter for a while. Pawarumi should definitely fit the bill.

4

Mordhau

DEVELOPER TEAM MORDHAU
PUBLISHER TEAM MORDHAU
DUE MARCH 2017
mordhau.com

Morhau is a German swordfighting technique that sees fighters gripping their swords by the blade and using the crossguard to strike blows (usually against more heavily armoured opponents). This is but one of the techniques players can employ in this semi-realistic melee combat game. While not an accurate representation of HEMA (Historical European Martial Arts), Mordhau does take a realistic approach to the capabilities of the weapons and armour in the game. Brutal multiplayer matches await.

5

A House of Many Doors

DEVELOPER PIXEL TRICKERY GAMES
PUBLISHER PIXEL TRICKERY GAMES
DUE OUT NOW
pixeltrickerygames.com

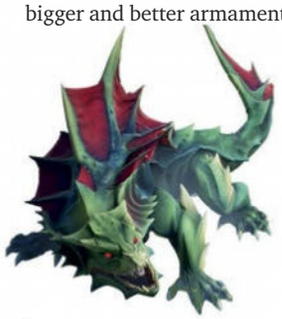
Explore a parasitic dimension in a many legged velocipede train, meeting and recruiting various NPCs that have been trapped in the House of Many Doors, fighting biomechanical monstrosities and fallen gods, all the while writing a long, procedurally generated poem describing your actions. It sounds a little bit insane and we can't wait. Impressions so far liken the game to Failbetter's excellent Sunless Sea, with a greater RPG slant. Sounds good to us.

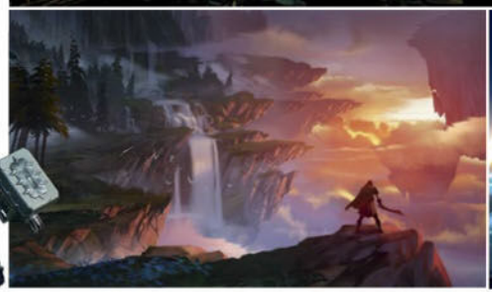
Dauntless

DEVELOPER PHOENIX LABS
PUBLISHER SYSTEM ERA SOFTWORKS
DUE 2017
playdauntless.com

6

■ Do you like Monster Hunter? Do you like Dark Souls? Well, Phoenix Labs, a new studio made up of ex BioWare and Riot Games (amongst other AAA studios) developers has a new action-RPG that may appeal to you. This free-to-play title will see players fighting their way across the floating islands of a post-apocalyptic fantasy realm, hunting the giant creatures that threaten what life remains, and using the corpses of slain monsters to craft bigger and better armaments.





7

Scum

DEVELOPER CROTEAM
PUBLISHER DEVOLVER DIGITAL
DUE 2017
scumgame.com

■ Sitting somewhere between The Running Man and The Hunger Games, Scum is a survival sandbox game about a bunch of prisoners on an island killing each other to amuse sponsors and the viewing public. Appeasing sponsors will net your prisoner gifts and if they're happy enough with your brutality they may even resurrect you with all your gear if you happen to die. Survival sandboxes are the flavour of the month, but it's developer Croteam that has us most excited.

8

GRIP

DEVELOPER CAGED ELEMENT
PUBLISHER CAGED ELEMENT
DUE EARLY ACCESS
cagedelement.com/grip

■ Do you remember those remote control cars with huge wheels meaning they could flip upside down? Now imagine driving one in some kind of apocalyptic combat road race. That's Grip in a nutshell. *(It's also '90s racer Rollcage - Ed.)*Each vehicle has huge wheels that not only allow them to flip upside down but also to drive on nearly any surface, making for what looks the be some seriously hectic (and potentially vertigo inducing) combat racing.

Iron Harvest

DEVELOPER KING ART GAMES
PUBLISHER KING ART GAMES
DUE 2018
iron-harvest.com

9

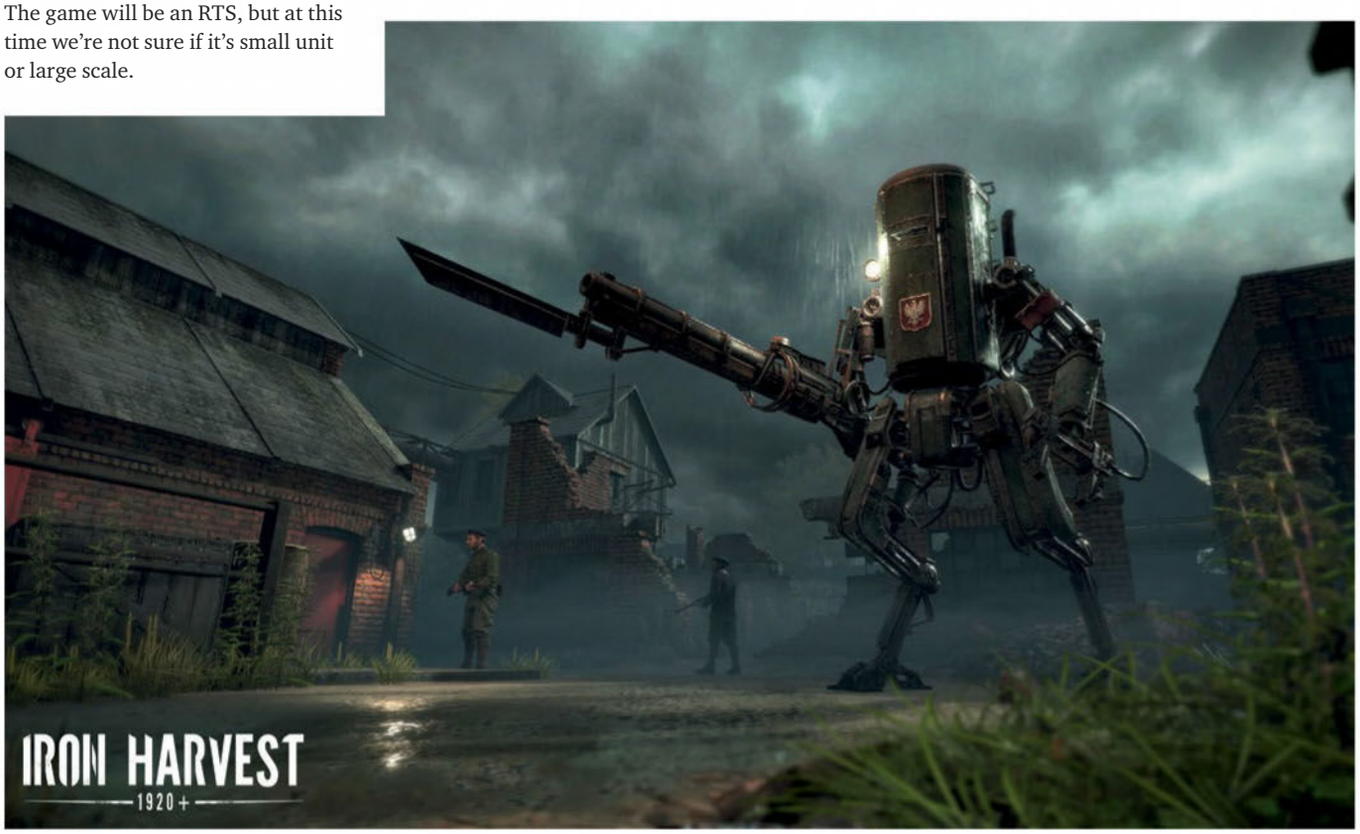
You may be familiar with the work of Polish artist Jakub Rozalski, even if you don't know his name. His paintings of the Polish/Soviet war, reimagined with robots and trained bears, became something of an online sensation in the last few years and became the inspiration of the hugely popular boardgame, Scythe. Although not a PC version of Scythe, Iron Harvest takes place in a similar alternate history, with human soldiers, bears and robots warring. The game will be an RTS, but at this time we're not sure if it's small unit or large scale.

Factorio

DEVELOPER WUBE SOFTWARE
PUBLISHER WUBE SOFTWARE
DUE EARLY ACCESS
factorio.com

10

Created by two, possibly evil, Czech programmers, Factorio is a horribly addictive city builder cum economic sim that sees players building a factory on a hostile planet. Gameplay is based around interlocking dependencies – power and resources needed to mine, transport, process and protect other resources rely on each link in the chain having its criteria satisfied. The end result is a massive time sink in which you build ever evolving Rube Goldberg machines.



MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA

DEVELOPER BIOWARE MONTREAL
PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
DUE MARCH 2017
www.masseffect.com

BEYOND THE HOLY TRILOGY

With the original Mass Effect trilogy 600 years in the past, BioWare is looking beyond the Milky Way galaxy for Mass Effect Andromeda. **NATHAN LAWRENCE**, a newbie to the series, chats with producer **Mike Gamble** about this trilogy follow-up that's juggling the high expectations of fervent fans while also attempting to attract the attention of a new generation of devotees.

The Mass Effect trilogy is heralded as one of the defining last-gen franchises. It's unsurprising, really, given BioWare's history of strong storytelling as well as memorable characterisation, coupled with the tantalising prospect of personalised player narratives by way of save-game importing across sequels.

It's a damn shame, then, that I came across the holy sci-fi trinity so late that I couldn't get into them. In truth, I played bits of Mass Effect 2 and 3, and I genuinely enjoyed what I played, but I was all too aware of the save importing, so I was determined to start with the original game.

The trouble is, for an action-RPG, the original Mass Effect is disappointing in terms of the 'action' prefix. I struggled with the combat and some clunky controls for as long as I could before succumbing to both frustration and one of my greatest gaming laments: not persevering through the first game to make it to the refinements (and epic storytelling) of the two sequels.

Mass Effect Andromeda, though, is a fresh start for greenhorns like me, diehard fans, and everyone in between, set centuries after the events of the Mass Effect trilogy and in a completely different galaxy. Producer Mike Gamble, whose bio credits the original Mass Effect as what drove him to work at BioWare, took time away from the pre-release crunch cycle to talk about what we can all expect from the next entry in the series.

WELCOME TO ANDROMEDA

If you're like me and haven't played the Mass Effect trilogy, there's no need to rush back and play the last-gen trilogy before Andromeda releases. "You don't need to know what happened in the Milky Way," confirms Gamble. "We've done a really good job of onboarding everyone into the IP in the beginning of the game, and the choices made in the trilogy don't have any real significant bearing on how Andromeda plays out."

This may make fans of the original trilogy groan, but there's a reason behind it. "We want to start with a fresh slate," says Gamble. "That fresh slate allows us to reach out to a lot of different players, maybe players who previously were thinking, 'I don't want to get into Mass Effect because I didn't play the first two and because I couldn't carry my save games over.' We wanted to

Die-hard fans will have to make do with importing their Mass Effect 2 saves into Frog Fractions 2.

eliminate all of those roadblocks."

This doesn't mean that returning fans should anticipate BioWare has lost its way when it comes to respecting and continuing the pillars of the preceding titles. "The thing I've always loved about Mass Effect was that sense of discovery and exploration and being the first. The first time in Mass Effect that you go to the Citadel. The first time humans are able to take their rightful place among the other Citadel races.

"I've always felt that sense of discovery and surprise. 'What would it be like to meet a new alien species for the first time?' That's one of the things we brought out pretty hard in Andromeda because we had an opportunity to. We moved to a different galaxy, so we've been able to weave a lot of that feeling into the DNA of Andromeda."

TO BOLDLY GO

Andromeda's story will follow the plight of the Hyperion, an ark that left Earth centuries earlier in the hopes of discovering new planets to settle. The Hyperion, though, has lost contact with the other Milky Way arks and it's up to the Ryder twins (players select which one to play as), whose father Alec is an elite N7 pathfinder (voiced by the legendary Clancy Brown), to help get this portion of humanity back on track.

> "because we can take cover behind any object we don't set up gameplay spaces telegraphing combat"

There's at least one new alien race, including the Kett who are set to be the main enemy in Andromeda. BioWare is taking steps to ensure the Kett don't come across as moustache-twirling villains. Gamble promises that the baddies of Andromeda will feel multidimensional. While you likely won't agree with the Kett's actions, you can expect to learn about their motivations and how those might make sense in Andromeda's political climate.

To keep it all grounded, BioWare has focused on pushing the human element in Andromeda. This is achieved by tying themes and ideas to modern day events that are relevant to players, with an overarching curiosity tickler of boldly exploring into the depths of an unknown galaxy.

SINS OF A SCI-FI EMPIRE

Even for fervent fans, it's hard to argue the Mass Effect trilogy wasn't without faults or even controversy. Most notable was the divisive ending of Mass Effect 3, which caused such a stir that BioWare released the Extended Cut DLC to provide additional closure and clarification.

"We want to build a game that still has a lot of choice and consequence because that's part of the DNA of Mass Effect," says Gamble when asked about how BioWare is approaching Andromeda's ending. "But we don't want to punish players, and we don't to make people feel like the thing they did didn't matter and didn't have impact."

Related to this topic, while fan-favourite Loyalty Missions return – optional quests that let you get closer to crew members – they're not critically tied to Andromeda's ending, which means crit-path players won't be punished for ignoring them.

Gamble's "DNA of Mass Effect" comment also refers to including a facet of the first game that was continued in the second but abandoned in Mass Effect 3: driving. It makes sense to include a vehicle, given the size and scope of planetary exploration in Andromeda, but BioWare has taken note of what did and didn't work with the Mako and Hammerhead vehicles when implementing the drivable Nomad in Andromeda.

"The Nomad is probably one of the biggest iterations we've had regarding gameplay besides jump," says Gamble. "We've been testing,

SAVE IMPORT(ANCE)

Returning fans may be disappointed by all this talk about a fresh start, but there may still be hope for importing saves in Andromeda. "The plan is to not go in that direction," admits producer Mike Gamble. "You never know. We'll definitely listen to what the fans say, but we want Andromeda to be a brand-new start."

building, and tweaking the Nomad for nearly all of the time that Andromeda has been in development. It was one of the first things we decided to lock down. The initial Mako in Mass 1 and the Hammerhead coming after that, it never played the way we wanted it to.

"It was never as responsive. It was never as fun to drive as we had originally envisioned. Putting those critiques together and designing the Nomad to solve those – to make it more responsive, to build gameplay into it, but still make it fun as hell to drive with turbo-boost jump and upgrades – that was a huge goal for us."

DUCK AND COVER

While combat evolved significantly between the first and third game, a lot has changed in terms of expectations of third-person shooters since the release of Mass Effect 3. One of the ways that BioWare is adapting to these changes is by forgoing the need to push a button to shift into cover in Andromeda.

"[Cover] is all context sensitive," explains Gamble. "As you approach cover, your animation set switches. You're clear that you're in cover; you know you're being protected. Then, you can [shift] left, right and over [cover], and use various buttons to mantle and vault. Peeking is based on going into tight aim and swinging to the left or right. That is all still there. No more do you accidentally vault or roll when trying to get close to cover, but you're just not close enough to press the button to suck you in."

This has also led to a philosophical change in how BioWare is approaching combat scenarios for Andromeda. "In the trilogy and many games like this, combat is telegraphed very badly by having crates everywhere," says Gamble. "Everyone knows that crates equal cover, cover equals safety, safety equals you have to have a fight. Because we can take cover now behind pretty much any object – a rock, a tree, a crate, a piece of furniture, anything – we don't set up the gameplay spaces to be telegraphing combat nearly as much, so that just gives for a more realistic experience."

CO-OP CONSIDERATIONS

One of the other punishing aspects of Mass Effect 3 was how the best endings were tied to the cooperative multiplayer component. While co-op returns in Andromeda, you shouldn't see it as a feature into which you're pressured to sink time. "We took all the stuff people loved about multiplayer in Mass Effect 3 and we've continued to build on it," says Gamble. "We've removed things like the requirement to play multiplayer to get the best ending in the game.

"We've added in situations where you can jump from single-player to multiplayer very easily and seamlessly. We've added the ability

BIGGER, BOLDER STORYTELLING

Managing the twisting arcs of ongoing player decisions in the trilogy was no mean feat. With that pressure alleviated for Andromeda, BioWare is upping the narrative ante. "Writing-wise and narrative-wise, this is the most lines we've ever written in a Mass Effect game," says producer Mike Gamble. "It's the most narrative we've ever told [with] the biggest number of cinematics."

for certain rewards to carry over between single-player and multiplayer. We've packaged it all in a neat narrative that's told all throughout the game."

THREE-DIMENSIONAL COMBAT

Gamble confirms that Andromeda embraces the 'action' portion of 'action-RPG', which means players shouldn't expect to be able to have pacifist play-throughs. He also mentions that while there are opportunities for stealth and tactical gameplay, BioWare's intention is more on delivering tools that facilitate quality action moments. One of the ways BioWare aims to achieve this is by including jet pack-assisted jumps.

"Adding jump fundamentally changed the play space," says Gamble. "You no longer have a cover shooter on a 2D plane; you have a cover shooter in three directions. We've established and built our levels in such a way to play on that a lot. [Coupled with the new cover system], you have a fundamentally more agile, mobile combat space."

This idea of vertical movement potentiality also lends itself to a greater emphasis on verticality in Andromeda. "We try to build in verticality nearly everywhere in the game," says Gamble. "That's not to say we're creating a platformer. It's [about] building environments and spaces with upper floors and lower floors. More than just ramps and stairs, it allows you to move throughout the battlefield and get tactical advantages a lot more. In the open worlds, you'll see bases, obviously multi-floor buildings, but also guard towers, jumping on top of buildings trying to get a tactical advantage."

The jet pack also lets players hover. On top of this, you can still pause combat in Andromeda, but reportedly only to change weapons or partake in a consumable. You can also still issue orders to your supporting NPC squad mates, but BioWare has thankfully included individual ability timers instead of a global cooldown on all abilities.

FAUX-PEN WORLDS

You shouldn't read too much into Gamble's mention of "open worlds", either, if you're expecting Andromeda to be an open world game in the sense that it's comparable to Skyrim, The Witcher 3 or even GTA V.

"I wouldn't actually call it open world," clarifies Gamble. "An open world game is fundamentally based on open world principles. Games like Far Cry, Assassin's Creed, you're dropped into a world and you have to do many different things. Mass Effect is still a very story-driven game, but we put you into areas where exploration and going throughout a larger play space is key to progressing.

"It's a subtle difference, but it's important enough to bring out because we're still fundamentally leaning on really important pillars of tightly told, very narrative-driven story, amazing crit-path set pieces."

This also ties over into how BioWare is creating compelling secondary missions that don't descend into fetch-quest territory. "You have to start making sure you write quests that don't seem gamey or fetch quests," says Gamble. "Mass Effect has always been about telling a really compelling narrative, and that includes the side content. The side content has to form around telling

The precise moment our hero noticed the absence of a convenient stack of protective crates.

an interesting story, rewarding the player accordingly, rather than doing fetch quest-type things."

A TOUCH OF CLASS

In the Mass Effect trilogy, there were six classes that players could choose from: Soldier (combat), Adept (biotics), Vanguard (combat/biotics), Engineer (tech), Sentinel (biotics/tech), and Infiltrator (combat/tech). For Andromeda, while there are reportedly seven classes of sorts (Explorer is the new one), they're not a fixed player choice at the beginning of the game. Instead, players will have the freedom to pick and choose between abilities that will conform with specific class archetypes, but they won't be restricted to them.

"[Classes] exist in a different way," says Gamble. "We don't want you to lock into a class. We don't want you to lock into a certain build type. What we want you to be able to do is, as you go through the game, you unlock things called 'Profiles'. These Profiles are sets of powers related to a specific class that you can use and switch between at any point. You can switch between them halfway through combat; as you're landing on a hub, you can change them.

"That means you can spend your experience points or your powers in any way you want. We don't want to limit the player to, 'Only Infiltrators get access to Tactical Cloaks.' Anyone who wants it can get access to Tactical Cloaks. Like most games, you can re-spec your entire character for a cost and reset your powers and reinvest in different powers." Continuing with the trend of tying everything to storytelling, there's reportedly a narrative context for character re-speccing.

Gamble also offers an example of how this new Profile system works. "You have a stat of five or six powers you've already put points into, and these powers are whatever you want," explains Gamble. "At any given time, you can swap between those powers, AKA Profiles, and get different types of buffs based on the profile you select. Now, if you wanted to say, 'I don't want those powers anymore,' you re-spec your character and buy different powers."

COMPLETIONISTS VS CASUAL

Mass Effect Andromeda is set to implement series-first features, too. One of those is crafting, but Gamble, unfortunately, wants to stay mum on that feature for an upcoming reveal. What we do know about crafting is that scanning plays a big role in unlocking blueprints for weapons and armour. There are also whispers that alien technology facilitates the crafting of new items beyond ammo types and weapon mods.

Gamble's willing to talk about the new survival elements in Andromeda, though. "There's the average player who wants to get through the game and enjoy the story," says Gamble. "For those players, the survival aspect – the hazardous aspect of these planets – it'll definitely play a role but it won't be front and centre. Those players who want to explore every nook and cranny, every cave, every tower, everything on these planets that we have to give, they're going to have to be more aware of them.

The Tempest crew sighed as No Man's Sky threw up yet another dull desert planet

> "you no longer have a cover shooter on a 2D plane; you have a cover shooter in three directions"

"We've built in the systems to be very upgradeable: very forgiving to players who don't want to wander too far off the beaten path. There are some areas in the game where, unless you're prepared to face the hazards and get through it, it's going to be hard as hell."

BACK FOR MORE

Gamble teased at the possibility that skilled players may be able to navigate planetary hazards such as intense radiation without the need for the relevant protective armour upgrades. Outside of skilled pathfinding, Gamble says that Andromeda has a certain sense of Metroidvania to incentivise players to return to a challenging part of a planet they might not have been able to conquer the first time around.

There's also the tease that there will be certain combat encounters and titanic bosses, with enemies that scale alongside the player, that might require a similar approach to conquering after the player has unlocked the right weapons, armour and/or abilities.

I may have never properly played a Mass Effect game, but if what this rookie has seen and gleaned from Gamble is any indication, Mass Effect Andromeda certainly has the appeal to capture the attention of returning fans and encourage newcomers to take it for a spin when it launches on the 23rd of March. PC

GAME OF THE YEAR 2016

STAR CITIZEN ALPHA 2.4.0 ■ I AM SETSUNA ■ ABZU ■ ARMA 3: APEX ■ NECROPOLIS ■ HEADLANDER ■ SHATTERED SKIES ■ INSIDE ■ STARBOUND ■ ZOMBIE NIGHT TERROR ■ FATED ■ DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED ■ NU
WARLOCK OF FIRETOP MOUNTAIN ■ REDOUT ■ CIVILIZATION VI ■ THUMPER ■ BATTLEFIELD 1 ■ EAGLE FLIGHT ■ MAFIA 3 ■ GEARS OF WAR 4 ■ DOWELL ■ SHADOW WARRIOR 2 ■ ARAGAMI DISHONORED 2 ■ MALLOW DRD
DOGMA: DARK ARISEN ■ FAR CRY: PRIMAL ■ DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING ■ STREET FIGHTER V ■ SUPERHOT ■ GRIM DAWN ■ FIREWATCH ■ LAYERS OF FEAR ■ THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD ■ DEATHSMILES ■ WE ARE THI
AURION: LEGACY OF THE KORI-ODAN ■ CODE OF PRINCESS ■ THE BANNER SAGA 2 ■ HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER ■ OVERWATCH ■ TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER ■ BATTLEBORN ■ DOOM ■ HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION ■ STELL

X-COM 2 ■ HOMEWORLD: DESERTS OF KHARAK ■ RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER ■ DARKEST DUNGEON ■ DRAGON'S DOGMA: DARK ARISEN ■ FAR CRY: PRIMAL ■ DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING ■ STREET FIGHTER V ■ SUPERHOT ■ GRIM DAWN ■ FIREWATCH ■ LAYERS OF FEAR ■ THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD ■ DEATHSMILES ■ WE ARE THE DWARVES ■ THE DIVISION ■ GEARS OF WAR ■ HITMAN ■ DARK SOULS 3 ■ BATTLEFIELD GOTHIC: ARMADA ■ NEED FOR SPEED ■ QUANTUM BREAK ■ OFFWORLD TRADING COMPANY ■ 1979 REVOLUTION: BLACK FRIDAY ■ AURION: LEGACY OF THE KORI-ODAN ■ CODE OF PRINCESS ■ THE BANNER SAGA 2 ■ HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER ■ OVERWATCH ■ TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER ■ BATTLEBORN ■ DOOM ■ HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION ■ STELLARIS ■ GOLIATH ■ ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST ■ KILLER INSTINCT ■ AUDIOSHIELD ■ THE TECHNOMANCER ■ MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST ■ EVE VALKYRIE ■ ELITE DANGEROUS VR ■ ONECHANBARA ZZ CHAOS ■ THE SOLUS PROJECT ■ ANIMA: GATE OF MEMORIES ■ FURI ■

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

GAME OF THE YEAR 2016

POWERED BY

SEAGATE

THE PC POWERPLAY CREW BRING YOU THEIR PICKS FOR THE BEST OF LAST YEAR

2016 was, for many people, not a very nice year. Despite personal setbacks, however, 2016 was a cracker when it comes to PC gaming, with a constant and steady flow of great games throughout the year. These are our favourites.

BARRACUDA COMPUTE
IRONWOLF NAS
SKYHAWK SURVEILLANCE

MOST INNOVATIVE GAME/TECH

NATHAN LAWRENCE

> THE FROSTBITE ENGINE

✦ Continues to show its versatility. Between its seamless adoption into FIFA 17 and its continued visual/audio standard-setting for the Battlefield series, it's the engine that keeps on impressing.

MARK WILLIAMS

> STAR CITIZEN

✦ The infinite draw distance technology Star Citizen has been retrofitting into CryEngine (now Lumberyard engine which is based on the same codebase) on top of the 64-bit conversion as seen in the "From Pupil to Planet" trailer is frankly amazeballs. You can be standing on a planet look up at a moon or other nearby planet and travel to and land on it, with all the art assets seamlessly streaming in.

JAMES SWINBANKS

> VR

✦ It's still early days in the commercial world of virtual reality, but it's hard to argue against its potential. Sure, there are problems inherent to the medium that developers are still addressing – the solitary nature of the experience, for example – but for a sim-racer like myself, there is no better alternative to sitting in a real life race car than jumping into a simulator equipped with a VR rig.

DANIEL WILKS

> 1979 REVOLUTION: BLACK FRIDAY

✦ While the game charts a familiar mechanical course, using the medium to educate people about a little known part of history from a very personal standpoint is a great exploration of the potential of games to be both learning and emotional experiences.

1979 REVOLUTION: BLACK FRIDAY

TITANFALL 2

BEST SHOOTER

NATHAN LAWRENCE

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ Surprisingly respectful handling of a World War I campaign spliced with incredibly addictive multiplayer that's somehow more exciting than its recent modern counterparts. DICE, you've done it again.

JAMES O'CONNOR

> TITANFALL 2

✦ Movement is so incredibly satisfying in Titanfall 2 that every single kill feels almost distressingly satisfying. The best run-to-slide mechanic ever in a game? Maybe.

MARK WILLIAMS

> DOOM

✦ The king of FPS returned in 2016, and what a refreshing taste of rocket-jumping fast-paced fragging it was.

JAMES SWINBANKS

> TITANFALL 2

✦ In what has been nothing short of an unbelievable year for shooters, particularly ones with single-player campaigns, Titanfall 2 stands out as one of the best. Astounding technical performance aside, Titanfall 2's level design and mechanics complement each other more cohesively than most, despite causing the narrative to feel oddly-disjointed. That aside, the relationship between Cooper and BT is a nice, unexpected touch in a Robot McShooty-fest.

TERRENCE JARRAD

> OVERWATCH

✦ With extremely tight shooting action to suit a range of skill levels and playstyles from up close assault to long range sniping and everything in between, Overwatch is the shooter that caters for everyone without sacrificing anything to do it.

ANDREW GRAY

> DOOM

✦ One hell of a good time. A brilliant reboot of the granddaddy of shooters. RIP AND TEAR!

JAMES COTTEE

> OVERWATCH

✦ The inevitable future of the video game economy revolves entirely around waifus and loot crates, and Blizzard is committed to being on the right side of history. Some criticised Overwatch for being incomplete at launch and for being needlessly grasping in its monetisation, but it shipped with quasi-gambling elements and badonkadonks, and that's all that really matters.

DAVID WILDGOOSE

> DEVIL DAGGERS

✦ The first-person Robotron I didn't know I wanted until I played it. Instinctual, pure shooting that takes the genre to its logical conclusion.

THE GUARDIAN SERIES
LEARN MORE AT SEAGATE.COM
SEAGATE

BEST STRATEGY GAME

NATHAN LAWRENCE

> TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

✦ Look, I don't touch 100% turn-based games, so neither Civilization VI nor XCOM 2 were ever going to make this list for me. Total War: Warhammer is a great starting point for Total War newbies, and the faction differences are really hammered home thanks to the Warhammer IP.

MARK WILLIAMS

> ASHES OF THE SINGULARITY

✦ The DX12 benchmark synonym actually has a decent campaign and game mechanics with a unique take on how to win by capturing interconnected nodes and holding them which can leave you stretched thin battling on multiple fronts but with AI smart enough to do the basics with you not around.

JAMES SWINBANKS

> CIVILIZATION 6

✦ It might be the sixth iteration, but it's also the most complete day one Civilization game that Firaxis have pulled together. The addition of districts and the revamping of religion and trade, both of which are given a greater emphasis than in previous games, gives Civ VI impetus to go new places with its DLC. One of my favourite games of the year.

DANIEL WILKS

> THE BANNER SAGA 2

✦ I would most likely vote for Civ VI, but I haven't had a chance to really get into it yet, so there's that. The fact that The Banner Saga 2 improves on and expands what was already a very good first game also makes it a very worthy contender.

MEGHANN O'NEILL

> CIVILIZATION 6

✦ Much as I loved Civilization 4, one unit per tile in Civilization 5 changed play in a way that meant I could never go back. In Civilization 6, progress towards technological advancement is boosted directly as a result of entrenched choices you make. This adds a delightful layer of detail around which the micromanager can organise their attention. It also makes complete sense that researching Seafaring would take less time if you have a city on the ocean, more time if you don't.

JAMES COTTEE

> ATLANTIC FLEET

✦ One of the most neglected WWII theatres in all of gaming, but also one of the most pivotal. Deploy your U-Boats and your Panzershiffs, and savour the nail-biting intensity of turn-based artillery plotting. The Thinking Man's World of Warships (or: The Man of Action's Rule the Waves).

DAVID WILDGOOSE

> CIVILIZATION 6

✦ I find it hard to compare Civ to other games. I am so in deep with the series that it can feel like all I can see are its flaws. Civ VI may well have leader AI whose passivity is surpassed only by its incompetence on the rare occasions it does go to war. But it's also the most complete a Civ game has been at launch since Civ 2. And it may well have an endgame that peters out once you hit the Modern Era. But I can just start a new game and add to the 300+ hours I've already played.

CIVILIZATION 6

BEST RPG/ ADVENTURE

JAMES O'CONNOR

> THE DIVISION

✦ I didn't play The Witcher 3 expansion or Dark Souls 3 properly yet. They're both probably better than The Division. But I still really liked this game, which I maintain was an excellent 30 hour co-op shooter RPG that misrepresented itself as a semi-MMO, and if I won't defend it at this point who will?

DANIEL WILKS

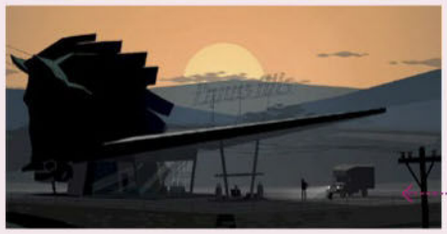
> DARK SOULS 3

✦ It wasn't the biggest year for RPGs but the high points were particularly good. Of course, Dark Souls 3 was the highest of these peaks. I've been a fan of From Software's franchise since I imported a copy of Demon's Souls from Play Asia, and now, four games later, the series is even better than it was at the beginning.

DAVID WILDGOOSE

> KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

✦ Unsettling and vaguely surreal, Kentucky Route Zero released its 4th and second-last act in 2016 and continues to be the best point-and-click adventure that most resembles a weird, meandering 1970s road movie.



ASSETTO CORSA

BEST RACING/ DRIVING GAME

JAMES O'CONNOR

> TRACKMANIA TURBO

✦ Some frustrating courses aside, this is a heap of fun. Make sure you hit that loop juuuust right.

MIKOLAI

> F1 2016

✦ I didn't play Forza, so this gets the nod. Now if they could just bring back 'classic mode' and let me race against Ayrton Senna circa 1990 that would be 'sick'.

MARK WILLIAMS

> ASSETTO CORSA

✦ Not only are the physics and graphics top notch and continue to improve, it won't cost you an ongoing fee like iRacing does just to play it. You only pay for new car and track DLCs, if you want to. The car and track selections continued to grow immensely this year. Most importantly Assetto Corsa finally brought officially licensed Porsche cars back to the gaming/simulator scene after over fifteen years of absence since EA's exclusivity deal penned with Porsche for the now ancient NFS: Porsche 2000 title. This in itself is worthy of an award.

If you're a racing sim purist, or want to go the next level beyond games like Project Cars or Forza, it's a must try.

JAMES SWINBANKS

> F1 2016

✦ Codemasters have finally hit that critical line between accessibility and simulation with F1 2016 that opens it up to both armchair drivers and hardcore sim racers alike. Manual race starts and on-the-fly strategy changes go a long way to recreating the demands put on drivers during an F1 race. Excellent AI will race you hard and jostle for position whilst defending their place. It really is the best F1 game ever made, finally surpassing the greatness that was the Geoff Crammond's Grand Prix series.

"deploy your U-Boats and savour the nail-biting intensity of turn-based artillery plotting"

BEST ACTION GAME

NATHAN LAWRENCE

> GEARS OF WAR 4

✦ Does GoW4 count? Because it should. The campaign has some great set pieces, while Horde mode and competitive multiplayer are as frantic as they are bloody satisfying.

JAMES O'CONNOR

> DISHONORED 2

✦ To be honest I'm not sure that Dishonored 2 is actually better than the first game, but all my quibbles are forgotten when I'm sleep-darting three domino'd guards, or far-reach flinging enemies across the room, or accidentally killing, like, three times as many people as I intended.

MARK WILLIAMS

> RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

✦ With glorious tombs, ruins and wilderness areas to explore, crafting and lots of shooting and explosions combined with a solid story line, Lara gets my thumbs up for best action hero of 2016.

DANIEL WILKS

> ICEY

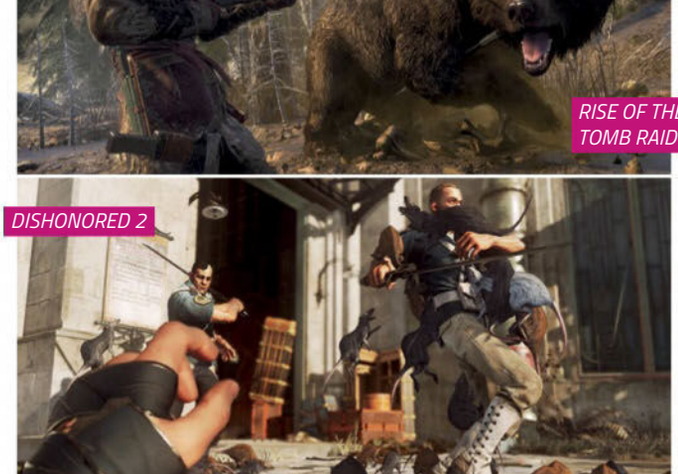
✦ This Chinese side-scrolling indie not only has one of the most fluent and impressive combat systems I've seen in ages, it's also one of the best meta-games I've ever played. Apparently there's an English voice cast coming soon. Will be interesting to hear what the unreliable narrator sounds like.

DAVID WILDGOOSE

> SALT & SANCTUARY

✦ This mishmash of Dark Souls and 2D platformers is simultaneously a blatant rip-off and a brilliant reinvention. When something's executed this perfectly, I'll forgive its few new ideas.

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER


DISHONORED 2

FIRECUDA
FOR THE FASTEST SPEEDS
BIG • FAST • DURABLE
LEARN MORE AT SEAGATE.COM
SEAGATE

BEST GAMEPLAY

NATHAN LAWRENCE

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ The multiplayer gameplay loop had me so hooked I put 130 hours into it over the first few weeks of the game. Sure, it has bugs (an unfortunate DICE trademark with every new Battlefield launch), but it's fun playing alone online, and even better with a five-stack of friends.

JAMES O'CONNOR

> TITANFALL 2

✦ I will think about that time travel level at least once a week, every week, until I die.

JAMES SWINBANKS

> DARK SOULS 3

✦ There are a lot of reasons to like Dark Souls 3 – the nightmarish creature and world design and the deliberately shrouded narrative reveals come to mind. But for me, the biggest stand out is the tightness and responsiveness of the combat mechanics. Player movement in Dark Souls 3 is second to none, and frankly makes other games feel bad at the gamepad. From Software have set a new standard with their games, it's time for others to catch up.

TERRENCE JARRAD

> OVERWATCH

✦ Combining its shooting prowess with its online capabilities, Overwatch is tough to beat, even before you add the synergies of a well composed team and the strategic opportunities available when working together and utilising the environment. It's a gestalt experience of Team Fortress 2 and your favourite MOBA, and is entirely accessible to both genre newbies and veterans; a masterclass in game design.

MEGHANN O'NEILL

> DUSKERS

✦ There's a place where panic and good spelling no longer meet and this is in deep space, on the wreck of a starship that met some initially inscrutable fate. Of course, if you frantically mash "d44 enter" instead of "d4 enter", the drone with the capacity to salvage scrap is destroyed and you'll need to send another to rescue it, preferably one with some kind of turret that you pulled out of a military vessel in another system. Duskers is like a program that teaches you to type, by scaring the hell out of you.

MARK WILLIAMS

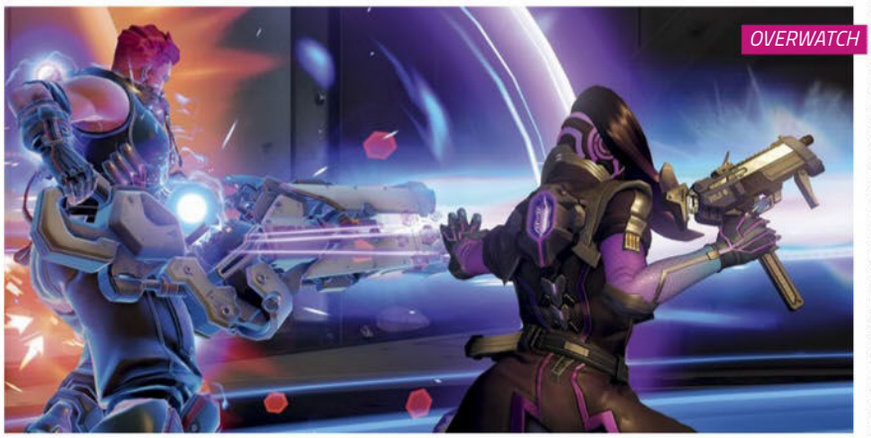
> SUPERHOT

✦ Time moves when you move? A CRAZY yet totally awesome game mechanic. It needs to be on your must play list right now.

DAVID WILDGOOSE

> THE WITNESS

✦ Most developers are simultaneously bad at teaching players how to play their games and terrified they won't understand them. So they hold our hands, pause for elongated tutorials, and place giant chevrons to tell us where to go. Jonathan Blow is confident enough in the design of his puzzle island to communicate everything the player needs to know without using a single written or spoken word. The result is sublime, seamless and endlessly rewarding.


OVERWATCH

BEST STORYTELLING

FIREWATCH

JAMES O'CONNOR

> FIREWATCH

✦ The word 'mature' gets thrown around a lot, but it's still honestly rare to feel like a game is speaking to you directly as an adult, banking on life experience. Firewatch hit me hard.

MARK WILLIAMS

> FIREWATCH

✦ Just about all the story comes through a walkie talkie in this game, but the writing (and voice acting) is so well done that even though this is essentially just a walk-em-up game, the story completely keeps you driven and moving forward.

ANDREW GRAY

> DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

✦ We didn't ask for some of the awkward social commentary, but Deus Ex still delivered a deep story in a rich world.

JAMES COTTEE

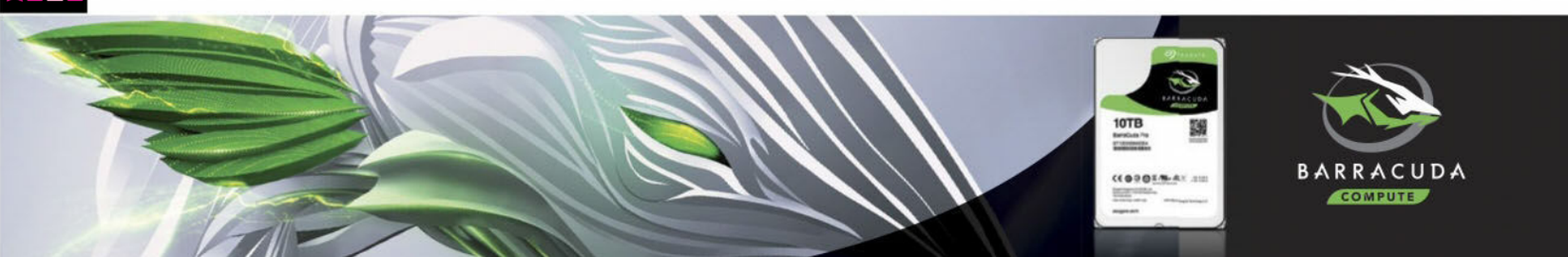
> HEARTS OF IRON IV

✦ Charge up your Führer Mana and see if you can find One Weird Trick that can deliver victory to the Axis. I've yet to play the update that enhances play for Commonwealth nations, but presumably it lets you play as Australia and finally right history's greatest injustice: our humiliating defeat in the Great Emu War.

DAVID WILDGOOSE

> VIRGINIA

✦ Few games tell a non-linear story in the sense where the order of events you play is not the order of events that happened. Virginia is confident in its bold, multi-threaded narrative and its themes resonant more forcefully from the effort required to piece them together.



MAN'S SKY ■ PHANTARUK ■ HEARTSLASH ■ BATMAN: A TELLTALE GAME ■ SPACE RIFT ■ ETERNAL CRUSADE ■ WOW: LEGION ■ OBDUCTION ■ RECORE ■ KLANG ■ THE CURIOUS EXPEDITION MOTHER RUSSIA BLEEDS
OPS ■ WATCH DOGS 2 ■ SARA IS MISSING ■ ICEY ■ FARMING SIMULATOR 17 ■ TITANFALL 2 ■ TYRANNY ■ X-COM 2 ■ HOMEWORLD: DESERTS OF KHARAK ■ RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER ■ DARKEST DUNGEON ■ DRAGON'S
DWARVES THE DIVISION ■ GEARS OF WAR ■ HITMAN ■ DARK SOULS 3 ■ BATTLEFIELD GOTHIC: ARMADA ■ NEED FOR SPEED ■ QUANTUM BREAK ■ OFFWORLD TRADING COMPANY ■ 1979 REVOLUTION: BLACK FRIDAY
LARIS ■ GOLIATH ■ DRI AND THE BLIND FOREST ■ KILLER INSTINCT ■ AUDIOSHIELD ■ THE TECHNOMANCER ■ MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST ■ EVE VALKYRIE ■ ELITE DANGEROUS VR ONECHANBARA Z2 CHAOS ■ THE SOLUS
PROJECT ANIMA: GATE OF MEMORIES ■ FURI ■ STAR CITIZEN ALPHA 2.4.0 ■ I AM SETSUNA ■ ABZU ■ ARMA 3: APEX ■ NECROPOLIS ■ HEADLANDER ■ SHATTERED SKIES ■ INSIDE ■ STARBOUND ■ ZOMBIE NIGHT TERROR ■ FATED ■ DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED ■ NO
MAN'S SKY ■ PHANTARUK ■ HEARTSLASH ■ BATMAN: A TELLTALE GAME ■ SPACE RIFT ■ ETERNAL CRUSADE ■ WOW: LEGION ■ OBDUCTION ■ RECORE ■ KLANG ■ THE CURIOUS EXPEDITION ■ MOTHER RUSSIA BLEEDS ■ WARLOCK OF FIRETOP MOUNTAIN ■ REDOUT
CIVILIZATION VI ■ THUMPER ■ BATTLEFIELD 1 ■ EAGLE FLIGHT ■ MAFIA 3 ■ GEARS OF WAR 4 ■ ORWELL ■ SHADOW WARRIOR 2 ■ ARAGAMI ■ DISHONORED 2 ■ MALLOW DROPS ■ WATCH DOGS 2 ■ SARA IS MISSING ■ ICEY ■ FARMING SIMULATOR 17 ■ TITANFALL 2
TYRANNY ■ X-COM 2 ■ HOMEWORLD: DESERTS OF KHARAK ■ RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER ■ DARKEST DUNGEON ■ DRAGON'S DOGMA: DARK ARISEN ■ FAR CRY: PRIMAL ■ DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING ■ STREET FIGHTER V ■ SUPERHOT ■ GRIM DAWN ■ FIREWATCH

BEST INDIE GAME

JAMES O'CONNOR

> FIREWATCH

✦ I played Firewatch all the way through in a single sitting. I don't even have the patience to do that with most Telltale episodes.

MARK WILLIAMS

> FACTORIO

✦ A game that starts off so simple and quickly turns into a logistics nightmare, yet never leaves you feeling overwhelmed. Defend against the bug hordes or go into free play mode to quietly mine, melt, stamp, manufacture stuff to ultimately build your space ship in peace. Or for the smarter folk out there build logic gates and basic computer components and even video players using just the in-game components and mechanics.

JAMES SWINBANKS

> THE WITNESS

✦ The Witness is so close to being my game of the year for 2016. In terms of communicating its rules to the player, it's unparalleled. The design and look of the island is bewilderingly beautiful. Colours pop out and draw the eye in every direction, which is played on for some of the more visually natured puzzles. One of the most creative, satisfying, well-designed games of the last decade, never mind 2016.

MEGHANN O'NEILL

> THE CURIOUS EXPEDITION

✦ In games like Colonization, some of the magic is lost because we already know much of what, where and who explorers found on their journeys. In The Curious Expedition, procedural generation solves this, alongside some really genuinely magical moments, when the land itself rebels against your intrusion or fantastic creatures are found. Throw in madness, questing, inscrutable tomes and cans of so-British baked beans and you have a winning formula and an exceptional game

ANDREW GRAY

> PONY ISLAND

✦ An inventive and atmospheric puzzler about escaping Satan's arcade machine.

DANIEL WILKS

> INSIDE

✦ Probably my favourite single experience of the year.

MIKOLAI

> NO MANS SKY

✦ Don't listen to the Internet lynch mob, this is brilliant while it has you under its spell.

JAMES COTTEE

> FROG FRACTIONS 2

✦ They delivered on their Kickstarter promise over a year late, and US$20 may seem a little steep for a novelty indie game, but on the plus side Frog Fractions 2 does offer a unique gaming experience – a rare and precious commodity in our increasingly samey world. The original is still a free web browser game, and still a must-play for discerning indie gaming gourmands.

THE CURIOUS EXPEDITION

BATTLEFIELD 1

BEST GRAPHICS

NATHAN LAWRENCE

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ Anyone who says anything different is insane. DICE somehow manages to make a new Crysis-like game every year, in terms of visual fidelity, albeit without the hang-up of needing a 4K-ready rig to run it on high enough settings to appreciate the eye candy.

JAMES O'CONNOR

> FORZA HORIZON 3

✦ Australia has plenty of beautiful sights, but I'd probably still rather live in Horizon 3 Australia.

JAMES COTTEE

> MAGIC WAND

✦ Avante Guard developer The Catamites has shown a fascinating devotion to the notion of anti-immersion – the graphics and interface in every release are so aesthetically jarring that it's impossible to forget that you're just playing a video game. There's a surplus of ugliness for its own sake in our modern media, but I give The Catamites a pass for their delirious excess.

MARK WILLIAMS

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ DICE's Frostbite engine continues to impress and generate jaw dropping visuals

JAMES SWINBANKS

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ I have never had a good enough GPU to warrant being able to add to this category, but having bought a GTX 1080 recently, I feel pretty good about giving this to Battlefield 1. The mud, the destruction, the lighting. It's gut-wrenchingly beautiful stuff to look at and runs as smoothly as butter on every system I've seen it on. One of the true technical benchmarks in terms of performance in 2016.

BARRACUDA PRO
FOR A FIERCE PC
VERSATILE • FAST • DEPENDABLE
Rescue DATA RECOVERY SERVICES
LEARN MORE AT SEAGATE.COM
SEAGATE

BEST SOUND

BATTLEFIELD 1

NATHAN LAWRENCE

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ Geez, I'm starting to sound like a broken record here. Love it or hate it, Star Wars Battlefront had pitch-perfect sound, and DICE continues this tradition with its incredibly immersive (and surprisingly educating) sound design in Battlefield 1.

JAMES O'CONNOR

> INSIDE

✦ PlayDead knows how to climb inside your head with a minimalistic soundscape.

MARK WILLIAMS

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ The official soundtrack for this game is fantastic. On top of that the in-game audio effects for everything from whizzing by biplanes with full Doppler effects and sniper shot sounds echo and delayed from the far rocky cliff faces of the Monte Grappa map, through to the behemoth trains, blimps and battleships. It all sounds perfect.

JAMES SWINBANKS

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ DICE have some of the best audio designers in the business and their talents are showcased perfectly within Battlefield 1. Depth and clarity in their audio work may have become the DICE hallmark over the years, but Battlefield 1's is a cut above the rest of their work, and anything else. In terms of presentation, detail, clarity and balance, you won't find a better game this year.

> "you don't notice the sound effects are made by a person's mouth"

MEGHANN O'NEILL

> BURLY MEN AT SEA

✦ It's a testament to how expertly crafted the sound effects in Burly Men at Sea are that you don't notice they're made by a person's mouth for the longest time. This carries over to musical tracks as well, with my personal favourite involving the singer gargling the melody, like when you brush your teeth, only in tune with the piece depicting swimming. The approach lends the entire experience a personal quality, like it is a story told with slightly too much enthusiasm to be believed.

BEST VOICE/MOCAP PERFORMANCE

NATHAN LAWRENCE

> RICH SOMMER AS HENRY IN FIREWATCH

✦ I didn't much like the game (the ending ruined everything that came before it, for me), but his performance, as well as Cissy Jones as Delilah, helped to distract from what was otherwise an embellished walking simulator.

JAMES O'CONNOR

> FIREWATCH

✦ Rich Sommer is a delight, but Cissy Jones' Delilah stole the game, the year, and my heart. Henry and Delilah feel like real people in a way few game characters do.

JAMES COTTEE

> WORLD OF WARSHIPS

✦ In addition to a robust loot crate system (heavily monetised over the Christmas break via purchasable 'gift' boxes), World of Warships floated a huge squadron of preposterous new voice packs in 2016. On top of a zany range of anime waifus, Wargaming baffled the world by making Steven Seagal an unlockable captain. And they've promised even more novelty voice packs for 2017 – the ride never ends!

DANIEL WILKS

> DOUG COCKLE AS GERALT IN THE WITCHER 3: BLOOD AND WINE

✦ Cockle has always been good as the gruff Geralt, but he's never been better than in the expansion Blood and Wine. The frivolity of Toussaint is anathema to the Witcher, making him even more uncomfortable and awkward in social situations than he usually is.

DOUG COCKLE AS GERALT

BEST SINGLEPLAYER

JAMES O'CONNOR

> TITANFALL 2

✦ This is the first time I've ever intentionally held back for several months on playing the last level of a game purely because I'm not ready for it to be over yet. Truly, one of the best FPS campaigns ever.

DAVID WILDGOOSE

> THE WITNESS

✦ I spent four weeks in early 2016 doing lines on Blow's island. The deceptively simple collection of line puzzles spent the rest of the year gnawing at my brain, its mysteries both tantalising and elusive.

MARK WILLIAMS

> CALL OF DUTY: INFINITE WARFARE

✦ I can't believe I'm nominating this. What has the world come to when a CoD has a great single-player campaign? Of course there was an excess of explosions and people yelling but the story had many high profile actors (highlights for me were Claudia Black and Lewis Hamilton) and a story that was a fraction deeper than normal CoD titles and totally had me hooked for this sci-fi space shooty uppy romp.

JAMES SWINBANKS

> TITANFALL 2

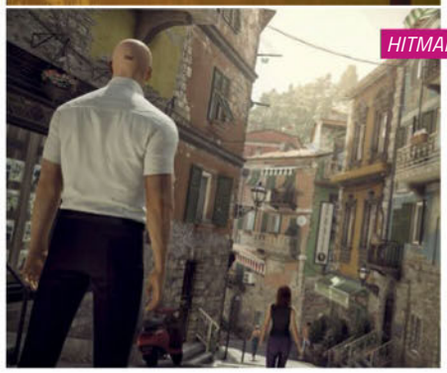
✦ Who'd have thought that in 2016 we'd have memorable single player first-person shooter campaigns to talk about, but here we are. Titanfall 2 is about as memorable as they come. Mechanically unique at almost every turn, Respawn tried something different with their first attempt at a true single player experience and my word did they succeed.

ANDREW GRAY

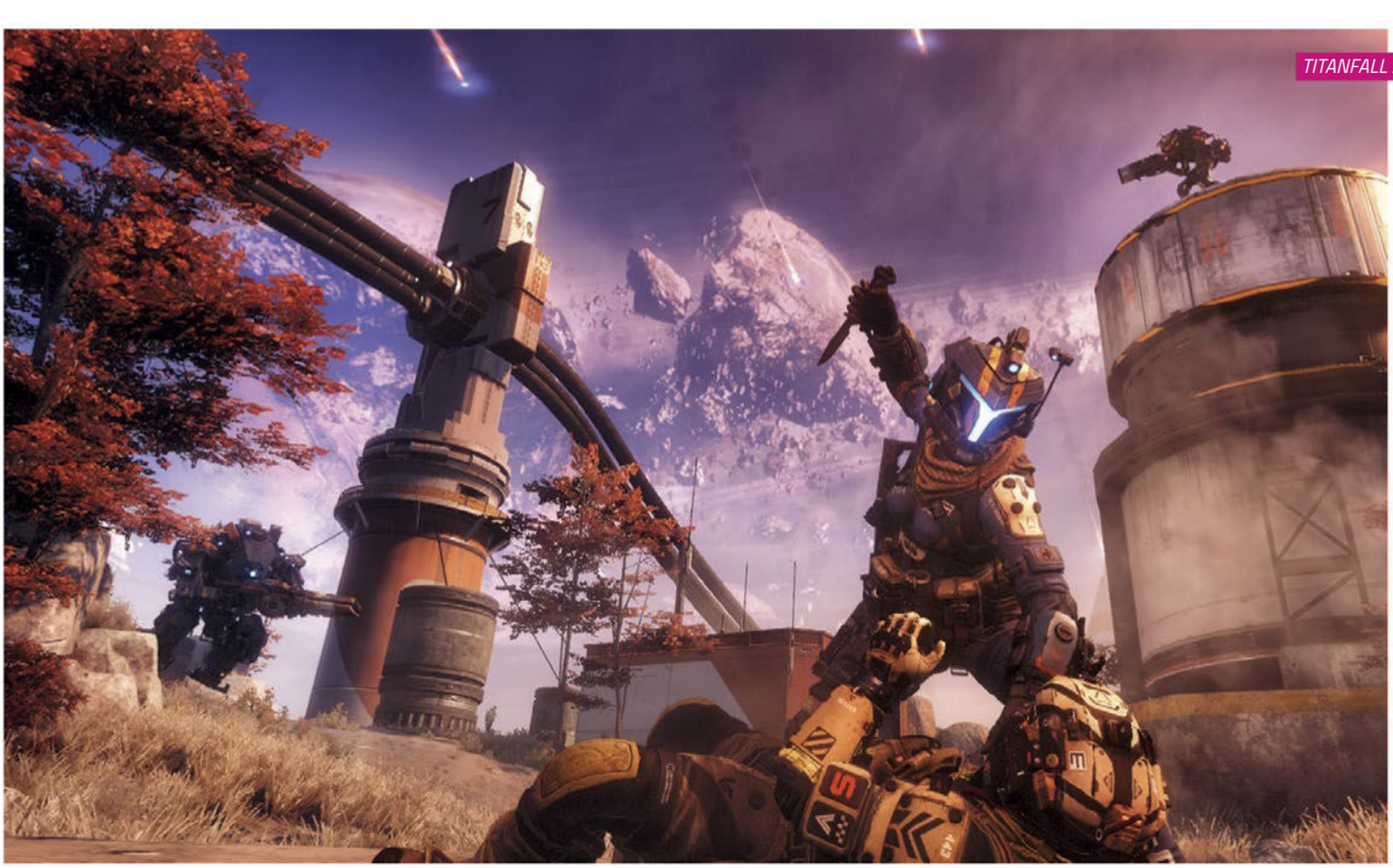
> HITMAN

✦ The sequel to Blood Money is here, and it's brilliant! There certainly wasn't another game between these two.

THE WITNESS



HITMAN



TITANFALL 2

THE GUARDIAN SERIES
LEARN MORE AT SEAGATE.COM

SEAGATE

BEST MULTIPLAYER

NATHAN LAWRENCE

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ It's the only game where you can annihilate a squad of players from an attack plane, get shot down, parachute onto an empty horse, flank a tank and disable it with anti-tank grenades, then kill the driver once they exit, steal their kit, repair the tank, and bring your team back to victory thanks to the liberated tank.

JAMES O'CONNOR

> OVERWATCH

✦ I main Junkrat, btw. *(You're fired - Ed.)*

MARK WILLIAMS

> BATTLEFIELD 1

✦ It's the only multiplayer game I'm still playing into 2017. The teamwork and balance of all the player classes and vehicles is spot on with great maps to boot.

JAMES SWINBANKS

> OVERCOOKED

✦ These days, Overcooked brings me so much joy. But that wasn't before hours of heartache, shouting and many charred burgers. Overcooked puts you and your couch friends in a hectic kitchen, asking you to prepare ingredients and put up finished orders in under a certain time limit. Wonderfully fun, provided you have someone else to play with.

TERRENCE JARRAD

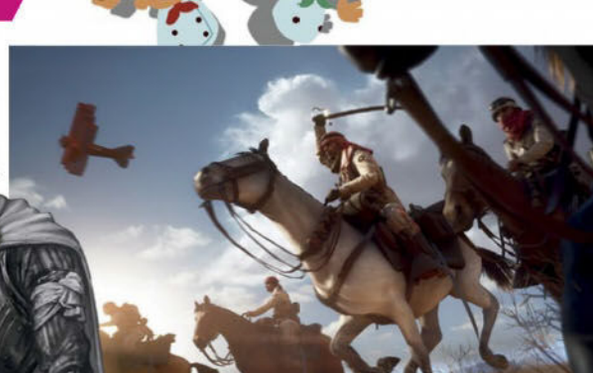
> OVERWATCH

✦ From arcade modes, to casual quick play, to unique events, to ranked competitive play, Overwatch offers the full gamut of online competition, with "just one more round" qualities.

ANDREW GRAY

> OVERWATCH

✦ Who needs hats when you have a game this good? Finely tuned blasting brimming with personality.

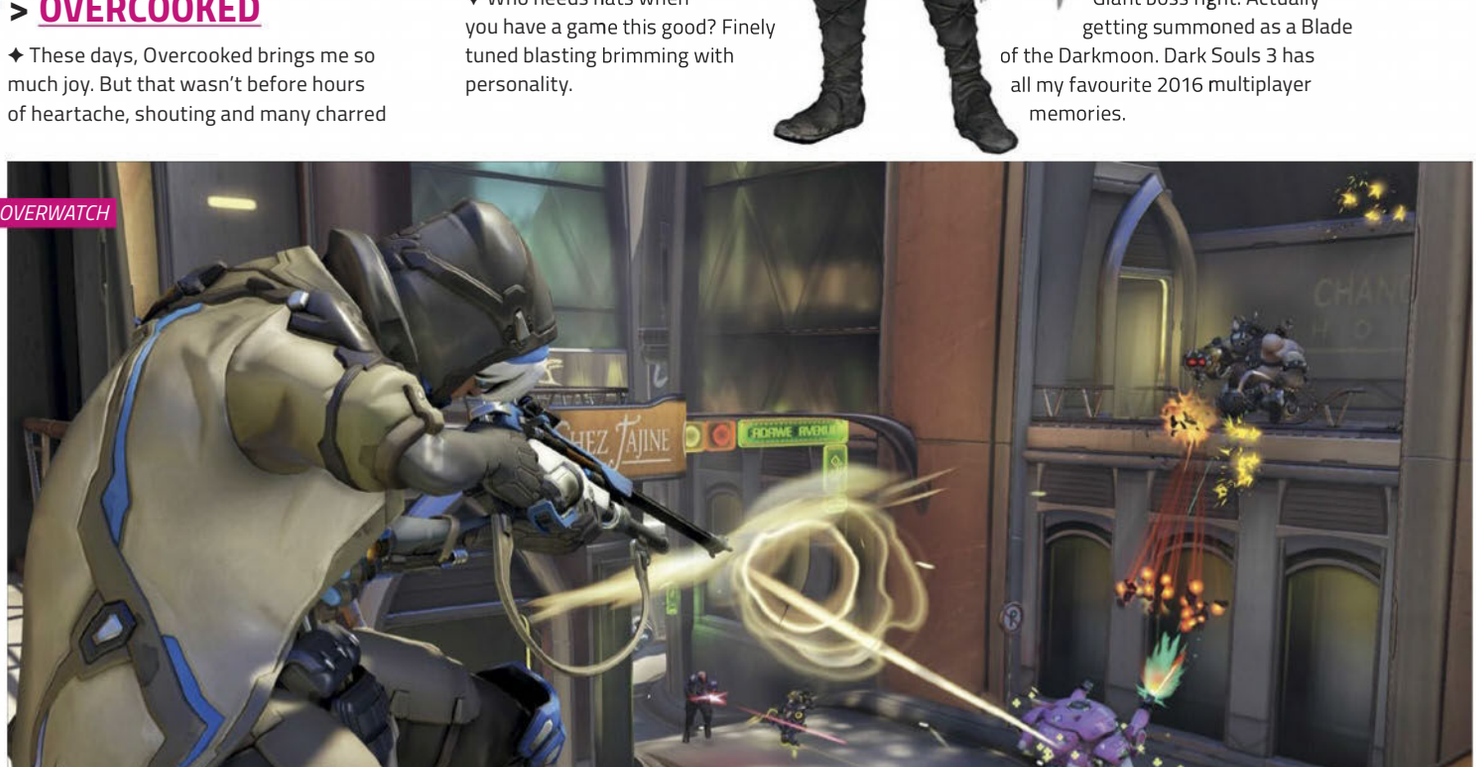


BATTLEFIELD 1

DAVID WILDGOOSE

> DARK SOULS 3

✦ Duelling on the balcony beyond Pontiff Sulyvahn's cathedral. Cosplaying as Siegward to help other players with the Yhorm the Giant boss fight. Actually getting summoned as a Blade of the Darkmoon. Dark Souls 3 has all my favourite 2016 multiplayer memories.



OVERWATCH

- 5X FASTER THAN STANDARD DRIVE
- FLASH ACCELERATED PERFORMANCE
- MULTI TIER CACHING TECHNOLOGY
- 5 YEAR WARRANTY

FIRECUDA
COMPUTE

LEARN MORE AT SEAGATE.COM

FIRECUDA
FOR THE FASTEST SPEED

BIG • FAST • DURABLE

SEAGATE

seagate.com

© 2016 Seagate Technology LLC. All rights reserved.

GAME OF THE YEAR 2016

The results are in and they are interesting to say the least. This year's winners of our Game of the Year really highlight the fact that the list is made up of the favourite games of the contributors and staff, not necessarily the highest scoring games. At least one 10 was given out in 2016 (for Inside), but that's not on the list. Both DOOM and No Man's Sky scored an above average but not Earth-shattering 6 but made the cut. It just goes to show, not all reviewers, let alone gamers like the same thing.

#5

> THE WITNESS

THEKLA INC
REVIEWED: N/A

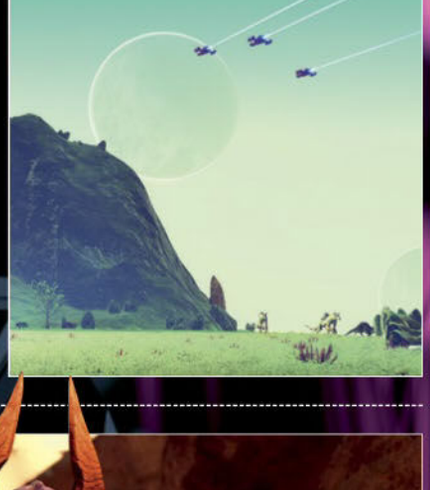
✦ "At the end of a long path that separates the Walled Garden starting area from the island's harbour sits a statue of a dog. There is no puzzle or anything of note along the path and the statue apparently serves no purpose. I still think about that dog often." *DAVID WILDGOOSE*

#4

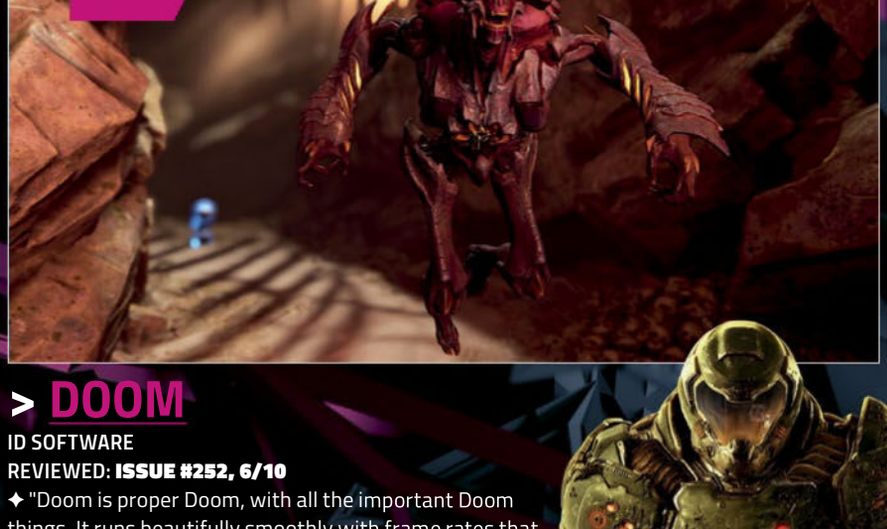
> NO MAN'S SKY

HELLO GAMES
REVIEWED: ISSUE #255, 6/10

✦ "Widely lambasted for not being all things to all gamers, and definitely partially broken at launch, No Man's Sky still proved to be a mesmerising experience, even without the new base building mechanics patched in. The idea that I was only an insignificant spec in the cosmos, incapable of any real impact apart from claiming discovery of planets that might not ever be visited by any other sentient life added a wonderful melancholy edge to the potentially endless exploration." *DANIEL WILKS*



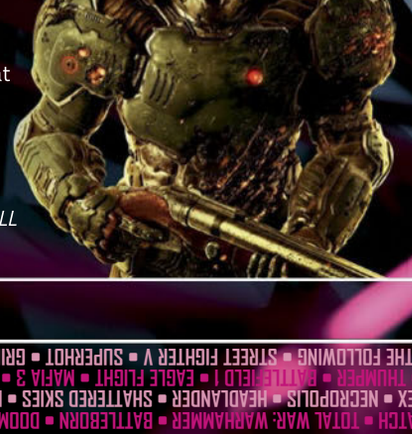
#3



> DOOM

ID SOFTWARE
REVIEWED: ISSUE #252, 6/10

✦ "Doom is proper Doom, with all the important Doom things. It runs beautifully smoothly with frame rates that make your PC feel better than it really is. The graphics are lush; all demonic and red and messed up and with plentiful goat skulls and men impaled on stakes. Check! Big bad weapons that make you want to kill big bad things? Check! It's Doom, alright? Get some." *BEN MANSILL*



#2

> TITANFALL 2

RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT
REVIEWED: ISSUE #258, 8/10

✦ "Although Titanfall 2's multiplayer improvements were well-received, they are not what the game will ultimately be remembered for. The campaign is the best FPS campaign in years, a thrilling showcase of intricate designs and single-level quirks that could happily sustain entire games by themselves (especially that time travel mission). Just moving through environments is a sheer delight – it's a much better Mirror's Edge sequel than Catalyst was, with the most satisfying run-to-slide ever." *JAMES O'CONNOR*

#1

> OVERWATCH

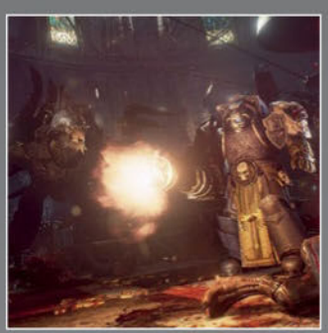
BLIZZARD ▪ REVIEWED: ISSUE #252, 9/10

✦ On the surface, Overwatch presents exceptional and diverse character design in a unique game universe, while complex class interplay, and myriad strategic and tactical opportunities lurk beneath for those willing to delve that deep. It gleamed with the usual Blizzard shine on release, and has only been polished brighter as the developer has acted on community feedback and refined what was already a winning formula. Overwatch is the shooter that can be enjoyed by anyone, regardless of ability. For these reasons it is our GOTY. We don't care if you play it casually or play it competitively; just make sure you play it.

GAME OF THE YEAR 2016
ABZU ■ ARMA 3: APEX ■ NECROPOLIS ■ HEADLANDER ■ SHATTERED SKIES ■ INSIDE ■ STARBOUND ■ ZOMBIE NIGHT TERROR ■ FATED ■ DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED ■ NO MAN'S SKY ■ BRIGANDINE: THE LEGEND OF RUIN ■ HEARTSLASH ■ BATMAN: A TELLTALE GAME ■ SPACE RIFT ■ ETERNAL CRUSADE ■ WOW: LEGION ■ OBDUCTION ■ RECORE ■ KLANG ■ THE CURIOUS EXPEDITION ■ MOTHER RUSSIA BLEEDS ■ WARLOCK OF FIRETOP MOUNTAIN ■ REDOUT ■ CIVILIZATION VI ■ THUMPER ■ BATTLEFIELD 1 ■ EAGLE FLIGHT ■ MAFIA 3 ■ GEARS OF WAR 4 ■ DRAGON'S DOGMA: DARK ARISEN ■ FAR CRY: PRIMAL ■ DISHONORED 2 ■ MALLOW DROPS ■ WATCH DOGS 2 ■ SAKA IS MISSING ■ ICEY ■ FARMING SIMULATOR 17 ■ TITANFALL 2 ■ TYRANNY ■ X-COM 2 ■ HOMEWORLD: DESERTS OF KHARAK ■ RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER ■ DARKEST DUNGEON ■ DRAGON'S DOGMA: DARK ARISEN ■ FAR CRY: PRIMAL ■ DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING ■ STREET FIGHTER V ■ SUPERHOT ■ GRIM DAWN ■ FIREWATCH ■ LAYERS OF FEAR ■ THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD ■ DEATHSMILES ■ WE ARE THE DWARVES ■ THE DIVISION ■ GEARS OF WAR 4 ■ DARK SOULS 3 ■ BATTLEFIELD GOTHIC: ARMADA

Games 259

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMES



Race through dark places

I hope you're not claustrophobic...

The first two of this month's game couldn't be more different if they tried. Deathwing brings the elite Terminators of the Dark Angels chapter to life in their struggle against a vast alien menace, while Resident Evil 7: Biohazard pits you against a terrifying in-bred family in a farm house riddled with secret passages and underground tunnels.

Then again, they're more in common than you think.

They both lead you into cramped locations, forcing you to deal with scary, otherworldly enemies. Light is in short supply, the shadows seeth with malevolence, and it's only your wits that stand between life and a rather sticky end.

Thinking about it, actually, you could make a really great game combining the two. I would play the hell out of a survival horror game set on board a space hulk, where it's you, your wits, and whatever you can scavenge against a genestealer infestation...

Okay, so that's basically System Shock. But you know what I mean.

David Hollingworth
Digital Editor

Contents

55 Space Hulk: Deathwing
58 Resident Evil 7: Biohazard
60 Nefarious
61 Imprint-X
62 Infinity Wars: Reborn
63 Memoranda
64 Her Majesty's SPIFFING

POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

SCORING SYSTEM | PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 10 scale. The higher, the better – though 10 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 10 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 5 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

WE PLAY ON:

ALIENWARE
GAME VICTORIOUS

SAMSUNG
950 PRO

Space Hulk: Deathwing

In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only meh

DEVELOPER STREUM ON STUDIO, CYANIDE
PUBLISHER FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE
PRICE $39.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.spacehulk-deathwing.com

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH: I am, I admit, somewhat of a Warhammer 40,000 tragic. I may not play the tabletop game anymore, but in my past I have painted and owned about a dozen different armies, fought countless battles in the oh-so-easy to parody grim-dark future of humanity, and even cosplayed once as an Imperial Rogue Trader.

I'm not proud.

So with all that said, I have to say that for all its flaws - and there are more than a few! - Deathwing could well be one of my favourite Warhammer 40,000 video games. It ticks off so many things that make the setting what it is - it's dark, it's gothic, it's grim as heck, and it does a great job of placing you in the role of almighty warrior of the Imperium - a Space Marine, clad in powerful Terminator armour, with a range of mundane and supernatural weapons at your disposal, fighting against an implacable alien foe in the depths of an abandoned, drifting starship. Pretty much the first time I fired my Storm Bolter, I was sold. However, I suspect you, Anthony, may not have been. Are you a 40k fan?

ANTHONY FORDHAM: My relationship with 40K has always been as a sort of distant admirer. I never had the ready cash to buy miniatures, but I used to reverently take down the boxes of boardgames like Battlefleet Gothic and Necromunda and even the original Space Hulk and admire all the pictures on the back… I do quite like the fiction of this dark and warlike universe. Sure, it doesn't make a lot of sense if you think about it, but those miniatures just look so cool.

It was the painting that stayed my wallet though. I knew I'd never be able to make MY Terminators look as good as the ones on the box. So I stuck to the PC games.

I did play the original Space Hulk. I found it kind of frustrating and distant. I bought Final Liberation, the Epic-scale turn-based wargame that had FMV cutscenes that were actually pretty good. (I didn't finish the game, I just dug through folders on the CD until I found the cutscenes and watched them all.) I played Dawn of War, which is of course only really a 40K THEMED game.

Actually it's Final Liberation that puts me in

David (left) and Anthony (right) cosplaying in preparation for this review.

Wilks much prefers his Orkish Vermineaters to crummt Terminators

mind of Deathwing the most. Oh the actual game is totally different but… what is it with 40K games having, well there's no kind way of putting this, a whiff of the low budget about them?

HOLLINGWORTH: Full credit to developer Streum on studio, but I know exactly what you mean. While the game itself is fine, a lot of the trappings of Deathwing definitely mark it as a lower budget exercise. One of the best-known Warhammer writers was behind the game, but it's hardly great video game writing, and the voice work is far less than stellar. Even the game's UI seems kludged together, with repetitive screens in throughout the loading process, and icon designs that are functional at best.

And the actual plot is little more than an excuse to run around and shoot the enemies of the Emperor. Thankfully, that bit really saves the game. There is suitable weight to the way characters move - those suits of Terminator armour may be powered, but they're still ponderous, and even while running you're not moving that fast - and you can only run in short bursts while your suit energy charges up again. The range of weaponry on offer is lovingly based on how they each work on the tabletop, from the high-capacity assault cannon, that can split hundreds of rounds down a corridor in a few seconds, but is less reliable, to the deadly plasma cannon - slower firing but capable of incinerating entire swarms. But often the most important thing with each weapon is reload time - ammunition is effectively limitless, but reloading the heaviest weapons takes time, and you simply cannot afford to be caught in the process while under heavy attack.

> "the actual plot is little more than an excuse to run around and shoot the enemies of the Emperor"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ Normal power armour isn't enough for you

+ Killing aliens is a religious experience

+ You just want to please the Emperor of All Humanity

When one of your squadmates reports they're running low, you really need to start covering them.

Does that side of the game work for you?

FORDHAM: In the first couple of hours? Not… exactly. My first thought was that the traditions of a high-action FPS were immediately at odds with the way Terminator armour works. Or rather, my experience of Terminators in, say, Dawn of War, saw them as relatively fast heavy assault troops jetpacking around the battlefield laying the smackdown on pretty much everyone. Here, you're more of a stompy robot. Walking around is SLOW and at the start of the game you can't jump. Early explorations saw me go down a corridor, find a dead end and then think "Ugh, now I have to walk all the way back up the corridor." That is NOT something you want players to be thinking at the beginning of your exploration-heavy FPS.

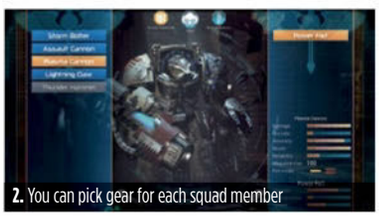
And when you go into the equipment list, the game says "Here is all the cool stuff a Terminator can carry and YOU DON'T HAVE ANY OF IT." I know almost all games can be seen as digital toyboxes where you have to prove your worth before you're allowed to play with most of the toys, but this seemed really explicit here.

I can tell right away it would be different for someone who knows what a "powerfist" is, what it can do, what its

SEQUENCE

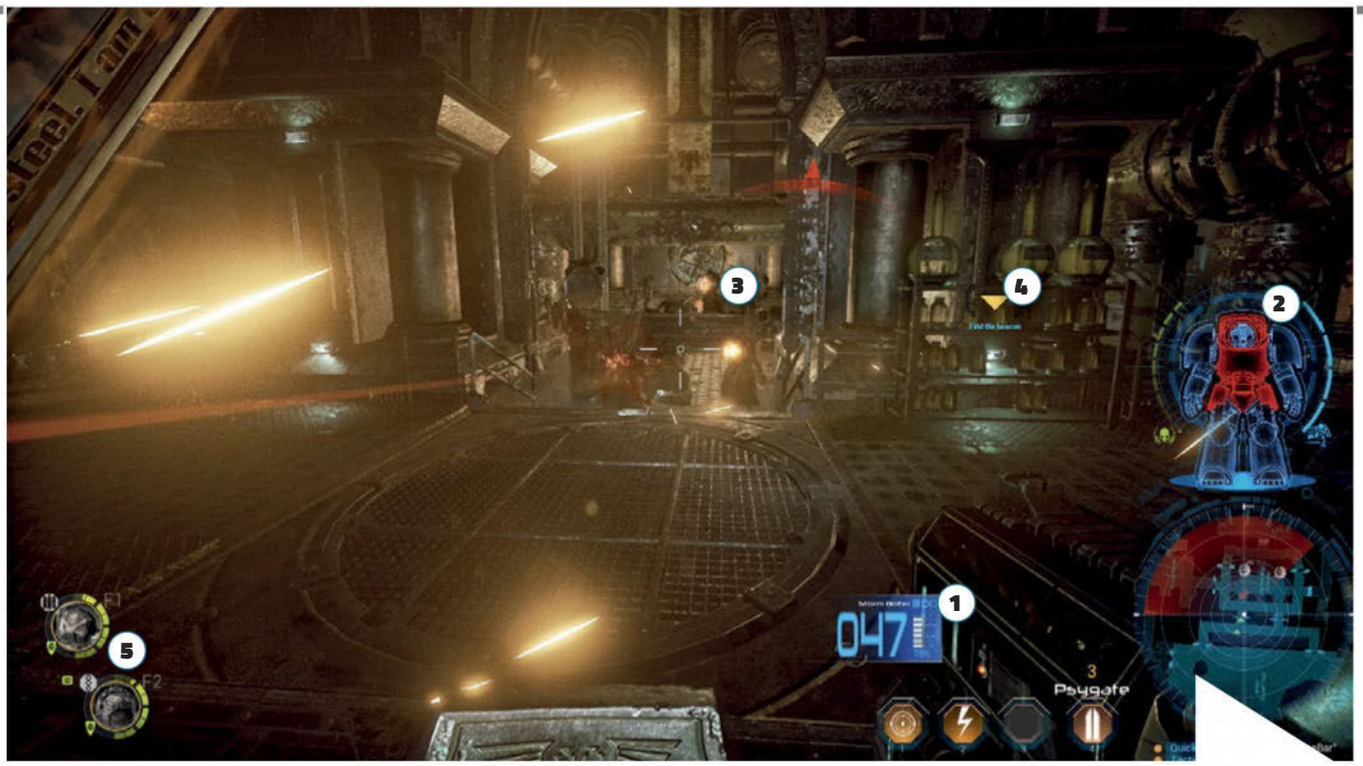
GETTING READY FOR WAR

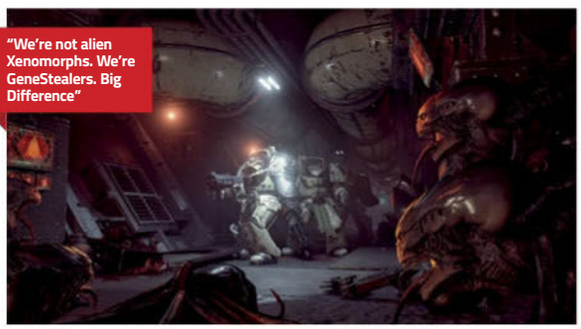
1. Before you embark on your mission, kit out your squad



2. You can pick gear for each squad member

3. Step into the handy dark portal!





"We're not alien Xenomorphs. We're GeneStealers. Big Difference"

MAIM THE XENOS

1. Clips have finite ammunition, but the clips themselves are infinite

2. Terminator armour is very effective - but you're not immortal

3. While genestealers are the main enemy, these armed hybrids are also common

4. just a few corridors away - the objective

5. Watching your allies is important, - when wounded, order your medic into action

tactical place is in a 40K battle. I know that tabletop veterans will see those lists of kit and drool at the thought of eventually being able to equip all that high-end stuff.

But I can't help but feel the whole thing could be a lot more… narratively immersive. Don't just give us a list, introduce us to each weapon via missions or even a simple NPC conversation with a quartermaster or something. There's an opportunity to create a sort of living wiki of the extremely detailed Terminator lore that exists… and I'm not sure that opportunity has been taken.

As a 40K tragic, do you think this game can stand alone, and be a cool experience for someone who has only a passing familiarity with Games Workshop's empire of experience plastic stuff? Am I worrying too much about the 40K-ness and not enough about the game?

HOLLINGWORTH: I think it's possible, but I also think you're absolutely right about a lot of the things that stand in the way. It's like there is a truly immersive game in here just begging for the devs to have gone that little bit further. I'm more than capable of ignoring the issues because I basically lived and breathed 40k for about two decades - I know the NPCs, the history of the Dark Angels chapter, and the backstory of the Genestealers (who are the vanguard for a much scarier race, the Tyranids). I know about how the huge cathedral-like starships of the setting work, so I can appreciate the amazing detail of each level, and just how balls-out, unabashedly GOFFIK it all is. As such, I really dig Deathwing.

But it's sadly a harder slog for a more casual gamer to get into. *DAVID HOLLINGWORTH & ANTHONY FORDHAM* PC

OR TRY THIS:

SPACE MARINE
2011, RELIC
▲ Best 40k shooter ever made
▼ No Terminator armour

DAWN OF WAR II
2009, RELIC
▲ Relic really get 40k
▼ May as well wait for DoWIII

ETERNAL CRUSADE
2016, BEHAVIOUR INTERACTIVE
▲ Massive multiplayer shootfests
▼ Not actually good

VERDICT:

A great game for dedicated fans of the Warhammer 40,000 setting, but a poor narrative and structure may get in the way for casual players.

7

Resident Evil 7: Biohazard

Evil takes on a new perspective

DEVELOPER CAPCOM
PUBLISHER CAPCOM
PRICE $59.99 USD
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, RETAIL
residentevil7.com

It has been a while since the Resident Evil game series has been much more than an interactive version of the film series, with the last few games concentrating on action more than scares and the majority of frights coming in the form of spring loaded cat style jump scares. Resident Evil 7: Biohazard turns back the clock somewhat for the franchise, returning to the more deliberate, slow and atmospheric style of the original game (and its excellent remake), making for the best Resident Evil in years and one of the best survival horror games in a good long time. The name of the game is a little odd though. Given the fact that the RE series is known as Biohazard in Japan, calling the game RE 7: Biohazard is tantamount to calling it RE 7: Resident Evil.

Although there are elements of the game that are vintage Resident Evil, for the most part you'd be hard pressed to link the game to the franchise. The characters, plot, pace and even the perspective are new to the franchise, making the overtly RE parts feel a little foreign. If anything the game feels more like something of a sequel to a lesser known but still excellent Capcom survival horror game, Clock Tower 3. Both games feature nigh invulnerable enemies that can only be fought at certain points of the game, necessitating stealth and hiding for the majority of game time. While Clock Tower 3 never made it to the PC, in recent years the Amnesia games followed a similar stealth and hiding conceit, and before that so too did Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth. That's not to say there isn't action and combat in Resident Evil 7. There are still weapons to find and monsters to kill at certain points, as well as some out of place feeling boss battles. The times when RE 7 slots neatly into the RE 7 mould the less satisfying it becomes.

This parrot has snuffed it!

> "nigh invulnerable enemies that can only be fought at certain points, necessitating stealth"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You need another excuse to be afraid of Red State Americans

+ You aren't afraid of bugs and slime

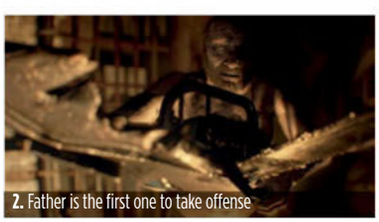
+ You want survival and adventure rather than survival and action

Players take the role of Ethan Winters, an everyman, who heads to a derelict plantation on the Louisiana bayou after he receives a mysterious message from his wife, Mia, who has been missing for three years. Once Ethan, still holding out hope of seeing his wife alive and well, arrives at the plantation, things go pear shaped very quickly. He finds Mia, she tries to kill him, he kills her in return, she comes back from the dead, and then there's immortal cannibal hillbillies. These aren't spoilers - they are the opening act of the game. The plantation house, and the surrounding area is a suitably creepy location for a survival horror game, and the hillbilly family make for a great, if a little cliched foil. Only one person seems to be on Ethan's side. A mysterious voice on the other end of a phone. Ethan must escape, and he must find a way to free himself and his constantly resurrecting wife from the madness of the house.

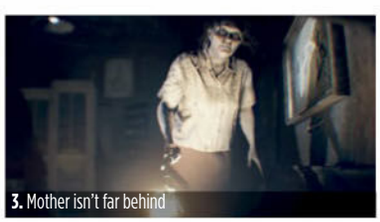
SEQUENCE

FAMILY TIES

1. Meet the Baker clan over a nice chitlin dinner



2. Father is the first one to take offense



3. Mother isn't far behind

Each of the members of the family act as something of a boss and a theme for an act of the game. Each of the three active family members has a different theme and power that, in subtle ways, indicated the overall style of that act. Creeping around the plantation house trying to avoid the family is wonderfully tense. Despite boss battles and the presence of the new generic cannon-fodder enemy, the "Mouldered", the emphasis of the game is still placed firmly on adventure rather than action, with Ethan searching through the plantation for themed keys, items and solving some rather simple puzzles to make his way through the house. It's the first game in the numbered series that has recaptured the feeling of the original game, and that's a very good thing.

The move to a first-person view really adds a whole new dimension to the Resident Evil series. The over-the-shoulder or fixed camera room based third-person view of previous games gave players a high degree of spatial awareness, but limiting players to a first-person perspective adds immeasurably to the paranoia of being in a cannibal hillbilly house. Every creak, groan, footstep and utterance will have you frantically looking about to make sure that there's nothing behind you, and turning any corner becomes a fraught process, as you slowly edge the camera around, knowing full well if you can see something it can probably see you too.

Unfortunately for all the great atmosphere and genuine scares in the game, the three major boss battles against the family feel out of place in an otherwise excellent game. Ethan Winters is an everyman, a husband to a missing woman, not a S.T.A.R.S. agent, so when he's cobbling together flamethrowers or unloading dozens of rounds into the suspiciously glowing spots of a mutated family member, it takes this normal man and turns him into a superhero, and takes this otherwise chilling game and turns it into an over the top, but still grotesque action game.

TAVISH FORREST PC

EXIT MOLD

1. The Mouldered - shambling, slimy monstrosities are the base line enemies of RE: 7

2. Mouldered come in two basic types, normal Mouldered and "Fatties", larger, tougher versions that explode on death. Both types are hardier than the average zombie but are slow enough to react that they can be avoided fairly easily

3. Completing a plathrough and starting a new game unlocks infinite ammo

4. The move to first person rejuvenates the RE franchise

5. Ethan's fancy watch is a magic widget for plot advancement

OR TRY THIS:

SOMA
FRICTIONAL GAMES, 2015
▲ Amazing atmosphere
▼ Unsatisfying action

CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS
MONOLITH, 2006
▲ Creeping dread
▼ Action focussed

CALL OF CTHULHU: DARK CORNERS OF THE EARTH
HEADFIRST PRODUCTIONS, 2006
▲ Lovecraftian horror
▼ QTE chases

VERDICT:

The best Resident Evil game in years is only bogged down by the blatantly RE bits.

8

Nefarious

Let's be evil

DEVELOPER STARBLADE
PUBLISHER STARBLADE
PRICE $14.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
nefariousgame.com

A lot of games coming out at the moment rely on nostalgia for old-school gaming in some form or another. The worst of these games simply ape something that has come before, resulting in clunky 8 or 16-bit snore-fests that evoke the feeling in little more than the look, unfair difficulty and lack of refinement that was the hallmark of many of the early games. On the other hand, there are those games that look to the past for inspiration and pay tribute to what has come before without having to resort to mimicry to evoke the right feelings. Nefarious is one of those games.

Have you ever wondered why princesses are kidnapped so often in old-school games? Are the villains just bored, are they randy, or do they have nothing better to do? In Nefarious, the secret is revealed - princesses are receptacles of nearly unlimited "princess power", so the protagonist (or antagonist in this case) has made a plan to kidnap all the princesses in the land, starting with his own, to power his death ray. It's a cute premise and one that works well to evoke just the right amount of nostalgia through mechanics or setpieces reminiscent of many that have gone before.

Each stage of the game is made up of three parts. In the first part, the villain must fight and jump his way to that level's princess, punching and throwing grenades at any enemy that dares defy him, and collecting any treasure that can be found. Once the princess is found, the villain is then chased by enemies, and the world specific hero to the end of the stage, prompting a kind of reverse boss battle, where the player must use evil boss battle machinery to take down the princess' protector. These battles make an excellent capstone to the levels and are nicely varied, with mechanics ranging from punching bombs to swinging a giant wrecking-ball a-la Dr Eggman. In between levels the villain returns to his base to check up on captured princesses, choose the next destination and spend the money stolen throughout the level to upgrade health, weaponry and the like.

As good as the premise and the boss battles are, there are still a few flaws in Nefarious that make it a somewhat cautious recommendation. The controls are a little iffy, both with the keyboard and mouse and controller, making some of the precision jumps or attacks much more difficult to pull off than they should be, specifically a little bit of input lag when jumping. The difficulty curve is also very erratic. The first levels are easy, and if you upgrade health everything up until the penultimate level becomes something of a doddle. Then the difficulty spikes alarmingly. The curve is initially too flat to be satisfying and the final jump just comes off as cheap.

With luck, some patching will tweak the curve and controls a little. If that happens, get yourself a copy of Nefarious. If not, be prepared for a good, but patchy, platforming experience. *TAVISH FORREST* PC

The mayor's promise to overturn the law was taken too literally.

> the villain must fight and jump his way to that level's princess, punching and throwing grenades

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You always wondered about the appeal of princesses
+ You find heroes old hat
+ You are nostalgic but not that nostalgic

OR TRY THIS:

EVIL GENIUS
ELIXIR STUDIOS, 2004
▲ Be an evil overlord
▼ and build bases

EVILQUEST
CHAOSOFT, 2014
▲ Awesome boss battles
▼ Against other baddies

BEHOLD
TOSTER12D3, 2016
▲ Evil twin stick shooting
▼ Evil twin stick shooting

VERDICT:

A great idea with excellent presentation hampered by some iffy controls

7

Imprint-X

Not all clickers are made equal

DEVELOPER MORGONDAG
PUBLISHER MORGONDAG
PRICE $5
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
imprint-x.com

Hot on the heels of the wonderfully melancholy meditation on solitary space exploration, RymdResa, comes the second game from two person Swedish design team, Morgondag. Well, hot on the heels is a bit of an exaggeration, but the year and a half break between releases has been worth the wait. Imprint-X is an entirely different kind of game but still manages to evoke many of the same feelings of isolation and loneliness as RymdResa. Not bad for a puzzle game about pushing buttons.

Underneath a domed city on an asteroid, a giant robot head releases a swarm of bugs that infest the population with mind-controlling nano-viruses. Players take the role of a hacker clone (or one of the surviving hacker clones if the production line in the intro is to be believed), whose job it is to save the intellectuals of the city from the nano-virus by decoding the individual infections. This is done by clicking buttons. Seriously. That's really the only interacting in the game, but that one simple action has surprising depth in the 100 puzzles that make up Imprint-X.

Puzzle design varies depending on the level or the branching path taken in a level. Some puzzles are like Simon Says or Memory, with players having to remember sequences of flashing lights so as to hit buttons in the right order, while others take a more geometric path, with the buttons rotating or otherwise moving shapes that have to be somehow joined together to complete the level. Other puzzles resemble tracks or simple machines and pressing buttons in the right order or the right number of times activates the next part of the machine. There are also boss battles that require not only timing but accuracy when it comes to clicking, as the buttons move swiftly on a predetermined path and the player must click on them a set number of times while it is in the target zone. Some puzzles have time limits, but all have a hard click limit, with the number of clicks available essentially being the hacker's health bar. Click too many times and you have to start the level all over again. Get part of the puzzle completed and you're rewarded with a few points of health and a few more clicks. It's a simple but moreish cycle.

There's a pleasant awkwardness and iciness to the presentation of Imprint-X. The pixel art protagonist is a prototypical introvert, cloistered first in a cloning pod then in a corner of the screen hiding behind VR goggles. The nano-virus puzzles are masses of simple shapes rendered in neon colours. The soundtrack deserves special mention. The fantastic synth score is entirely fitting with the action on screen but still wouldn't seem out of place in a Nicolas Winding Refn film. The isolated soundtrack is available on steam and will probably be on high rotation in the office.

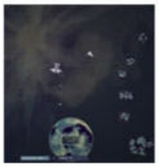
While not necessarily as memorable as RymdResa, Imprint-X is still a very enjoyable followup. We're definitely keen to see what sad, lonely and lovely game Morgondag come up with next.
DANIEL WILKS PC

> a swarm of bugs that infest the population with mind-controlling nano-viruses

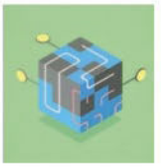
WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You're really good at pressing people's buttons
+ You want everything to be lit by coloured neon
+ You like your protagonists introverted and awkward

OR TRY THIS:



RYMDRESA
MORGONDAG, 2015
▲ Morgondog's first
▼ No clicking?



KLOCKI
MACIEJ TARGONI, 2016
▲ Minimalist puzzling
▼ Not melancholy

MACHINARIUM
AMANITA DESIGN, 2009
▲ Amazing soundtrack
▼ No nano-viruses

VERDICT:

Simple but effective puzzling bolstered by an excellent soundtrack

8

Infinity Wars: Reborn

Not a Marvel™ product

DEVELOPER LIGHTMARE STUDIOS
PUBLISHER LIGHTMARE STUDIOS
PRICE F2P
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, WWW.LIGHTMARE.COM.AU
www.lightmare.com.au

As the name suggests, Infinity Wars: Reborn isn't the first incarnation of Infinity Wars. The Australian-made trading card game (TCG) first hit the scene a few years back and was immediately recognisable for its spectacular art and simple but evocative animated cards. Although not enormously different from other TCGs on the market - the game still revolves around bringing out cards to play using a slowly growing pool of resources, and trying to balance defence with enough offensive might to damage the enemy player - there are more than enough interesting takes on convention to make it a worthwhile play.

Rather than tapping land to gain resources like Magic: The Gathering, Infinity Wars adopts a single resource that raises its maximum capacity every turn and refreshes. Each turn players can use the resource to pull cards out of their hand and put them in the Support zone. Unless the card has a special ability that negates it, no card can be played on the turn they are taken from the deck. The play area is broken into four zones: Command, Support, Assault and Defence. The Support zone is where summoned cards sit before they are activated, and is also the home of passive Support cards after they have been summoned. The Command zone contains command characters. These characters have special skills that can be used from Command while they are immune from hard and also set the groundwork for the type of deck a player can use. A Player with two red commanders and one green commander will have majority red cards (with some powerful cards that require two red commanders to summon) and a few green cards. The Assault and Defence zones do just what you think - cards placed in the defence zone block damage to the player's keep, and cards in the assault zone are used to attack the enemy.

It pains us to see an Australian developer spell it "defense".

> "rounds are resolved simultaneously... changing how interrupts and reactive cards are used"

Rather than taking turns, all rounds are resolved simultaneously. It's a nice twist that changes how interrupts and reactive cards are used. Another interesting twist is the fact that there are essentially two health bars in the game. Attacking the opponent's keep reduces health, but losing a summoned card costs morale points equal to the cost to summon the card. What this means is that players can't make cheap creature decks to chip down enemy health, as every little creature that is easily killed will whittle down your morale.

While Infinity Wars: Reborn is free to play and hands players weekly booster packs and allows players to buy additional boosters with real cash and in-game currency, the game also features a load of rather expensive DLC for the hardcore. As it stands there are currently seven DLC packs, the cheapest being $4.99, and the majority costing $49.99 each. These packs contain some alternate art, new battlefields, a bunch of themed boosters and some in-game currency. Whether or not that offers some value for money is best left up to you.
TAVISH FORREST PC

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You trading cards too static
+ You support Australian Made
+ You like free boosters

OR TRY THIS:

HEARTHSTONE
BLIZZARD, 2014
▲ Streamlined and accessible
▼ Painfully addictive

MAGIC: DUELS OF THE PLANESWALKERS 2014
STAINLESS GAMES, 2013
▲ Probably the best MtG game
▼ Overly complex rules

GWENT
CD PROJEKT S.A., 2017
▲ Incredibly deep and rewarding
▼ Not out yet

VERDICT:

Infinity Wars: Reborn is a fun TCG with some nice ideas. It doesn't reinvent the wheel, but it's fun, free and looks great.

8

Memoranda

Poignant and click

DEVELOPER BIT BYTERZ
PUBLISHER DIGITAL DRAGON
PRICE US$15
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, GOG
bitbyterz.com

Video game developers too rarely look beyond genre pillars like Star Wars or The Lord of the Rings for inspiration. So when the creators of a new point and click adventure claim to have been influenced by the short stories of Haruki Murakami, it piqued my attention. The end result only disappoints when it adheres too closely to the conventions of the adventure genre.

Murakami is a Japanese literary author best known for his novels Norwegian Wood, The Wind-up Bird Chronicle and 1Q84. He typically portrays a contemporary real world where the mundane is punctured by the surreal. Page upon page is devoted to describing banal activities such as preparing food while outside a second, moss-covered moon hangs in the sky. His writing can feel plain, almost naive, yet at the same time can feel exhausting in its painstaking attention to detail. In one book, a man sits at the bottom of a dry well for chapter after chapter. It can be hard going.

Memoranda isn't a retelling of any particular Murakami tale. Rather, it's a pastiche of his style; it borrows elements (characters, situations, cultural references) from a selection of his short stories and reworks them to explore the same themes of loss and the fragile reliability of memory that often punctuate the author's work.

It tells the story of a 20-something woman who suffers from insomnia, thanks to the unnerving presence of a gap-toothed old sailor at her bedside each night. She keeps old photos and scrawled-upon post-it notes pinned to her apartment wall in an effort to hang on to her memories of the past.

Pro tip: comb every screen with your cursor. Some hotspots are tiny.

> Memoranda isn't a retelling of any particular Murakami tale. Rather, it's a pastiche of his style

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

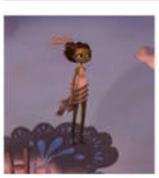
+ You observe connections where most people don't
+ You enjoy talking to animals
+ You ponder existence from the bottom of a well

The only problem is: she's forgetting her own name.

The game plays out in as traditional point-and-click adventure fashion as possible. Each of the slightly more than a dozen locations around the sleepy seaside town in which the woman lives is depicted as a single, static screen. You click to look at certain objects, to talk to various people, and to use or combine items you've collected along the way. New locations are unlocked as events unfold while certain actions can trigger changes to previously visited areas. The former tend to be well-telegraphed and highlighted on the town map but the latter often require backtracking just to double-check if anything's changed.

The puzzles are all over the place, frankly. They tend to take more from Murakami's sense of the absurd than the everyday. Where this fails is when there's no rhyme nor reason for a particular solution working, or when the surrounding dialogue or character observations fail to do their job in providing clues. But when they succeed there's a poetical resonance to the solutions. I enjoyed making these leaps of logic, connecting the metaphorical dots even if they were unintuitive. Even when I solved puzzles via brute force, I was often able to appreciate the cleverness of the solution in retrospect. Sometimes, objects in inventory are closer than they appear. *DAVID WILDGOOSE* PC

OR TRY THIS:



BROKEN AGE
DOUBLE FINE, 2014
▲ More gags
▼ Less absurd

KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO
CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2013
▲ Existential dread
▼ Fewer cats

VIRGINIA
VARIABLE STATE, 2016
▲ Narrative depth
▼ No puzzles

VERDICT:

An intriguing, if routine, adventure game where opera-singing cats and the ghosts of WWII soldiers are commonplace.

6

Her Majesty's SPIFFING

It's funny because [insert British stereotype]

DEVELOPER BILLY GOAT ENTERTAINMENT LTD
PUBLISHER BILLY GOAT ENTERTAINMENT LTD
PRICE $18.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
billygoat.tv

Near-future political what-if stories are always interesting. For instance, what if the UK elected a socialist government and abolished the monarchy so the Queen and her family had to be secretly smuggled to Canada by a hot fighter pilot and they almost got shot down, but really this is all just the drunken hallucination of a man living in far north Queensland during the wet season?

The above paragraph is actually a synopsis of Nevil Shute's 1953 novel In the Wet and I mention it because its premise is no less insane (nor any less Queen-related) than SPIFFING. Ahem, so, the Queen doesn't like the result of a recent Parliamentary "decision" so... ugh... so she authorises the launch of Elizabeth Tower (you know, the one with Big Ben in it) into space, right, because Elizabeth Tower is actually a rocket, okay, but it's carrying a spaceship that looks like a giant Mini smashed into the front of a Hawker Siddeley Harrier, see, and that ship is tasked with establishing a new British Empire. In space.

This is called COMEDY. The ship is piloted by the player-character Frank Lee English (geddit) and he has to stomp around solving puzzles and experiencing hilarious jokes and japes and amusements.

Look, this is a simple little point-and-click adventure of the old school. It's kind of weird the way developer Billy Goat has set up the graphics in a way that manages to make my 27-inch monitor look small, but whatever.

This game lives and dies by its humour and when I read about the jokes, or talk to people about the jokes, it does sound like quite a funny game.

Remember Rex Nebular (and the Cosmic Gender Bender)? Play that instead.

> your attitude to a crew member is determined by whether or not you make them get the tea

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You are a shameless British Imperialist
+ A getting the tea made puzzle? I'm in!
+ Haha the Queen has corgis, it's funny because they are all nearly dead now
+ You think Elizabeth Tower looks like a rocket somehow

Yet somehow in the playing it all falls a bit flat. I think it's a question of timing. The voice acting is good... but for a game like this, it needs to be GREAT. Those punchlines need to snap. That British wit needs to be so dry it sucks moisture out of the air. Yet these guys just deliver their lines and then rely on the animators to give their character a raised eyebrow. It doesn't quite work.

Okay there are some moments. Like an early dialogue sequence where your attitude to a crew member is determined by whether you make them get the tea and/or whether you are prepared to bring them tea.

Also, I did raise a half smile when I found out that if you select "American" as a language option for the game, it adds a really over-the-top laugh track. You know, for those yanks who don't quite pick up on the irony.

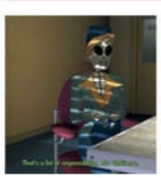
The standard criticism of every cheap Steam-distributed point and click adventure applies here: SPIFFING is too short. Yeah sure, it doesn't take that much less time to run though than, say, Sierra's Space Quest I if you know all the solutions, but Space Quest felt like a much longer game because the puzzles are so damn difficult. SPIFFING isn't that hard.

It's like one of those short-lived UK sketch shows that keep popping up on TV. Funny enough if you've got nothing else to do. But you may not feel the urge to rush out looking for a second season. *ANTHONY FORDHAM* PC

OR TRY THIS:

SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND
1990, LUCASARTS
▲ Insult sword fights, come on
▼ You can get it on iPhone now. Ew.

LEISURE SUIT LARRY: MAGNA CUM LAUDE
2004, HIGH VOLTAGE
▲ It was banned so it must be GREAT
▼ It... it isn't great



GRIM FANDANGO
1998, LUCASARTS
▲ A masterpiece of everything
▼ Makes other games look crap

VERDICT:

Neither funny enough to forgive the easy puzzles, nor hard enough to get away with meh jokes

5

ASUS®
IN SEARCH OF INCREDIBLE

FULL HD 1080

ASUS MG248Q 144Hz / 1ms Gaming Monitor

Your Need for Speed. Fulfilled

Lighting-fast Gameplay

24" Full HD monitor with an ultra-fast 1ms response time and blazing 144Hz refresh rate

ASUS-exclusive DisplayWidget

Intuitive software utility lets you tweak multiple display settings & share them with others. *Only share with same models

ASUS-exclusive GamePlus

Features a crosshair overlay, onscreen timer, a frame per second counter, and a display alignment function

Ergonomically Adjustable Design

Tilt, swivel, pivot, and height adjustment; VESA-wall-mountable design

ASUS Australia & New Zealand www.asus.com.au

DVD Contents

HAPPY MEMORIES

2016 had a heap of good games, so in memory of the year that was we've compiled a disk of 12 or our favourite free games and demos from last year's disks. Of course, the disk is also packed with some cracking new games on there as well for you to sink your teeth into. If you have any suggestions for content you'd like to see on the disk this year, let us know via email, on the forums or through social media and we'll see what we can do.

Enjoy.

The PCPP Team.

37 FREE GAMES AND DEMOS!

- Alien Swarm
- AltspaceVR—The Social VR App
- Aplowcalypse
- Black Rose
- Blink the Bulb
- Bloody Walls
- Card Hunter
- Cosmic Sugar VR
- Counter Agents
- Disturbed
- Dr. Langeskov, The Tiger, and The Terribly Cursed Emerald: A Whirlwind Heist
- Drop Alive
- Egg Time
- Eternal Card Game
- Google Earth VR
- Khimera: Destroy all monster girls
- Ludu
- Mandagon
- Maneki's Curse
- Of Guards and Thieves
- Palinurus
- panGEMic
- Picross Touch
- Plenty: Skyhearth
- Princess Remedy in a World of Hurt
- Regeria Hope Episode 1
- Rescue the Great Demon 2
- Say Goodbye
- Shadow Warrior Classic
- Spooky Night
- Sunset's Ashes
- Super Blue Boy Planet
- TrackMania Nations Forever
- Trick and Treat - Visual Novel
- VRchaeology: Prologue
- You Have 10 Seconds
- Zombie Vikings: Stab-a-thon

Installation instructions included on the disc. Browse the disc and launch **index.html** for more.

USING THE DVDS
PC PowerPlay DVDs are suitable for use in almost any computer but the software contained on the medium is for Windows operating systems only. Because each PC is different, PC PowerPlay and Next Media cannot guarantee the DVDs will operate as expected on every system, despite strict adherence to Windows compatibility.

LOADING
The DVDs are set to autostart. On insertion it will load the DVD's Terms and Conditions of Use disclaimer in your default Web browser. If the DVD failed to autostart, you can load the menu manually by running the file called start.htm in the root directory using Windows Explorer.

VIRUSES
These DVDs are rigorously checked for viruses during production, however, PC PowerPlay can make no guarantees to this end. Next Media always recommends that the DVDs be scanned using your own anti-virus software on first and subsequent uses.

INSTALLING SOFTWARE
Simply click the install/download link under a file's description to launch the installation program. please ensure that all other programs are closed and that any anti-virus software is disabled before performing a software installation. Due to STEAM region locking, not all content may be available toutside Australia.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT
PC PowerPlay assumes the end-user of these DVDs has the necessary computer knowledge required to operate and install software from this product, and cannot provide technical support either for this or for any of the software contained on this disc.

DVD REPLACEMENTS
PC PowerPlay can only replace DVDs that were damaged or faulty at the time of purchase. If you think a DVD fits into one of these categories then please contact the DVD Producer immediately to assess whether a replacement needs to be sent out. email: dwilks@nextmedia.com.au

© nextmedia

Need a hand tweaking, cooling, overclocking, benchmarking, optimising and game-making?

The PC PowerPlay Technical Handbook has you covered.

ON SALE NOW

Tech 259

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE

exCESs

Consuming all the tech in Vegas

"My god, what have I gotten myself into". This was the first thought that crossed my mind when I landed at this year's Consumer Electronics Show, the world's biggest consumer tech show, held in Vegas every January. It was my first time to make it there after spending several years dodging invites, so had no idea of the vast scale of the behemoth of a show before me. With just two days scheduled to cover the entire thing, I was pathetically unprepared for the scale of this glorious celebration of technology.

Until now, I'd thought Taipei's Computex IT show was huge, but CES makes it look like a quaint flower market sitting next to a Bunnings Warehouse. Other than a few key appointments courtesy of my sponsor Dell, I had around 15 hours to cover almost 4000 different booths. While a lot of it was irrelevant (no, I'm not in the market for a toothbrush with a video camera), as a tech-nerd there was simply too much for my small mind to comprehend in such a small amount of time.

If you're into any form of AV, home automation, drones, VR, robotics, cars, and basically every other form of consumer tech, there's simply nothing like CES. After spending two days sprinting through the halls taking snaps of the more interesting booths, it was time to leave. I've tried to sum up the key trends that I saw that I think you guys will be most interested in, but six pages is barely enough to scratch the surface of the amazing things I saw there. Though it was an exhausting experience, it was also intensely exciting to see just where technology is headed in 2017. It's going to be a bright year for gadget-lovers.

Bennett Ring
Tech Editor

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

Contents

69 MSI Aegis 3
70 BenQ W1210ST
72 Kaby Lake and 270-Series Mobos
76 Asus ROG Spatha
76 BlasterX Siege M04
77 ROG Centurion 7.1
77 ZQ Racing Alien
78 Scuf Infinity
79 BlasterX Vanguard K08
80 CES Report

THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU
INTEL I7 3770K
intel.com.au

MOBO
GIGABYTE Z77X-UD3H
gigabyte.com.au

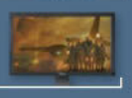
SSD
CORSAIR NEUTRON
corsair.com

RAM
8GB PATRIOT DDR3 2,133MHz
patriotmemory.com

GPU
RADEON HD 7970
amd.com

PSU
CORSAIR AX860I
corsair.com

DISPLAY
DELL U2711
www.dell.com.au



MSI Aegis 3 Benchmarks

Min FPS Avg FPS Score

GRID AUTOSPORT

ULTRA DETAIL, 4XMSAA

1920 x 1080	108	145
2560 x 1440	96	112

SHADOW OF MORDOR

ULTRA DETAIL, 4XMSAA

1920 x 1080	67	137
2560 x 1440	42	56

3DMARK Firestrike Extreme

2560 X 1440

Aegis 3	6007

3DMARK Firestrike

1920 X 1080

Aegis 3	11349

SYSTEM

MSI Aegis 3 Gaming Desktop

A mini-PC with massive looks

PRICE $2,299
www.msi.com

Looking like an alien prop from one of the spacecraft in *Independence Day*, the Aegis 3 is certainly eye-catching. This mini-PC is about half the size of a regular PC gaming tower, but its striking lines make it hard to miss. MSI has used some rather clever engineering to fit most of the goodies of a full-sized PC into such a small, oddly shaped case, but has made one major compromise in the process.

If you're a fan of bright lights, this blazing box will light up your gaming den like no other. Both the front panel and right side emit enough light to confuse incoming pilots, but the highly configurable RGB lighting system means you can tone it down or up as much as you like. There's also a handy carry handle at the rear so you can lug it around with ease.

We love the HDMI out on the front of the case, making it simpler to hook up your VR kit, and there's also a "One-click-to-VR" setting that apparently optimises the entire system for low latency operation. There's no real technical data on how this works though; shouldn't a gaming PC already default to this at all times?

Squished inside the case is Intel's latest 7th Gen Core i7-7700 CPU, but it's of the non-K variety, so you won't be doing any fancy overclocking. And we really do mean squished – there's barely any spare room inside, especially as the 450W PSU is tucked away inside, with no need for an external power brick. There's also a super-sized 2TB mechanical drive, alongside an Intel M.2 PCIe 256GB SSD. There's even an optical drive tucked into the top. 16GB of DDR4 memory is included, running at 2400MHz.

Integrated 802.11ac Wi-F is a handy inclusion, while a single Killer E2500 Gigabit Ethernet is there for the cable-inclined. Unfortunately there's one flaw that really sets the entire machine back, in the choice of GPU. Packing an MSI GeForce GTX 1060, this mid-range GPU is rather underwhelming considering the cost of the system. There is another version of this system that packs the GeForce GTX 1070, but it doesn't appear to be an optional upgrade.

> "If you're a fan of bright lights, this blazing box will light up your gaming den like no other"

As our benchmarks indicate, the use of a GTX 1060 makes this machine most suitable for gaming at HD resolutions when playing the latest, most demanding games; it's fine to run older games at higher resolution though. The Aegis 3 commands such a high price for the small form factor and mobility, not to mention rather unique design. Yet the choice of going for a top-end CPU combined with a mid-range GPU seems puzzling to say the least. *BENNETT RING* PC

- Small and mobile
- Unique case design
- Generally high-end components

- GeForce GTX 1060 is mid-range
- Rather pricey

VERDICT:

While it'squite the feat to squeeze so much into a small box, the choice to pair Intel's fastest CPU with Nvidia's mid-range GPU is questionable.

7

PROJECTOR

BenQ W1210ST Gaming Projector

Record-breaking low latency

PRICE $1319
www.benq.com.au

If you've been reading PC PowerPlay for a while, you probably know how passionate I am about projectors as the ultimate gaming display. When it comes to dollars per inch, they're unbeatable, delivering wall-spanning immersion at a cost much more affordable than big-screen TVs. However, they often suffer from input-latency, which is what makes BenQ's W1210ST a rather interesting proposition.

The company has focused on making this the lowest latency projector on the market. This means that as soon you hit your mouse button, your gun fires on-screen almost immediately. Projectors with high latency can add an extra 120ms or more to the time you hit fire and it displaying onscreen, but the W1210ST lowers this to a mere 16ms when operating in gaming mode. Basically this is imperceptible to all but robotic eyes.

It's also designed to throw out a huge image at a very short range, pumping out a 100-inch screen at a distance of just 1.5 metres. This is great for smaller rooms, but if you want to mount it at the rear of a longer room, could be a concern. The image is a standard HD resolution of 1920 x 1080, while the DLP chip inside delivers brilliant colour and contrast at such a low price point. It's also rather dazzlingly bright, with a rating of 2200 Ansi Lumens, so you can use it in rooms that are less than light-proof.

There is a price to be paid for the use of a DLP technology though – the dreaded "Rainbow effect", which gamers seem to be most perceptible to, as we spend so much time staring at screens. Even though this projector uses a six-speed wheel, we noticed ever-so slight

colour halos and rainbowing during fast moving scenes. Having said that, we're very prone to this effect, which many people never notice. So we'd highly recommend giving this projector a demo at the shop before you take it home; hopefully you're one of those who aren't susceptible to the Rainbow effect.

If you don't want to drape a HDMI cable from your PC to the projector, an optional wireless box will do it all via the wonders of radio waves, and BenQ claims this introduces zero latency to the entire system.

> "designed to throw out a huge image at short range, pumping out a 100-inch screen at a distance of just 1.5m"

It's great to see BenQ put gamers first, especially considering the fantastic price point of this projector; you'll pay a similar amount for a high refresh rate 30-inch panel. However, we just wish they'd gone with LCD technology instead of DLP, to guarantee no sign of the Rainbow effect. Given BenQ's love of DLP though, we can't see this happening in the near future.
BENNETT RING PC

- Fantastic price
- Ultra-low latency
- Vivid colours and contrast

- DLP chip can lead to colour distortion for certain viewers

VERDICT:

If you're not a Rainbow sufferer, this is one of the most affordable ways to get an incredibly immersive gaming display.

8

Game like the Pro's

The Official Fnatic Gaming PC

STARTING FROM $999

Fnatic A1 specs:

- AMD A10 7890K A-Series APU with Radeon R7 Graphics & Wraith Cooler 4.3GHz
- Gigabyte F2A68HM-DS2 Motherboard
- Kingston HyperX Fury 8GB 1600Mhz Memory
- 1TB Seagate SSHD
- Corsair VS550W 550W Power Supply
- Microsoft Windows 10 64bit Home Edition
- All PCs have an 1 Year RTB ORIGIN PC Warranty

Fnatic P1 specs:

- AMD FX-8350 Black Edition Vishera 8-Core 4.0 GHz (4.2 GHz Turbo)
- Gigabyte GA-78LMT-USB3
- Kingston HyperX Fury 16GB 1600Mhz
- Kingston 240G HyperX SSD 2TB Seagate HDD 7,200 RPM
- AMD 4GB Radeon™ RX 470
- Corsair VS550W 550W Power Supply
- Microsoft Windows 10 64bit Home Edition

The Choice of Champions

The Official Fnatic Gaming PC range is the result of a unique collaboration between Origin PC, and Fnatic, the world's most instantly recognisable eSports team. We've worked closely with the Fnatic CS:GO team in order to develop a range of PCs that give gamers everything they need to compete in eSports at the top level.

AMD A SERIES · ORIGIN HIGH-PERFORMANCE PCS · FNATIC · AMD ESPORTS

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT **www.originpc.com.au**

@2016 ORIGIN PC Corporation all right reserved. ORIGIN and the ORIGIN 'O' symbol are trademarks of ORIGIN PC Corporation. All other trademarks are property of their respective owners. *or any other world. The Human Race Will Always Prevail...

KABY LAKE

Incremental improvements mean Intel's new CPU isn't likely to excite gamers. **BENNETT RING** goes skinny dipping in shallow water...

While we wait with bated breath for AMD's new Zen-powered CPUs, Intel has once again delivered an annual refresh of its existing product range in the form of the new 7th Generation Core CPU. With little competition from AMD, once again we see Intel release a product that has the smallest of improvements, with one exception – media encoding/transcoding performance. Overall, the new 7th Gen Core CPUs, formally codenamed as Kaby Lake-S, offer some of the smallest changes we've ever seen from a new Intel desktop CPU.

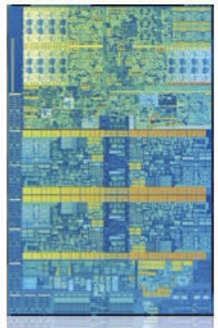
Keen readers will know that Kaby Lake CPUs were first launched for laptops (note the lack of the -S at the end of the mobile product CPU names), with the desktop launch taking place several months later. From this it's obvious where Intel's intentions lay; they're not too fussed about improving desktop performance, instead focusing on power efficiency for mobile. While we can totally understand that approach, it means that Kaby Lake-S isn't a very exciting product for gamers.

14NM+

Arguably the biggest change isn't a change at all – it's a refinement in the manufacturing process. Last year's 6th Gen Core was built on a 14nm manufacturing process, while this year's chip now uses what Intel calls "14nm+". Basically the 14nm process has matured to the stage where Intel can now squeeze a little extra performance out of its chips without having to make major architectural changes. In fact, the basic design of the x86 cores appears to be unchanged from last year's chips; now they just operate a little faster. For example, the new high-end i7-7700K now has a base speed of 4.2GHz, while its Turbo speed has increased to 4.5GHz. This is in comparison to last year's i7-6700K, which had a base speed of 4GHz and a Turbo speed of 4.2GHz. So far, so yawn-inducing, but there is one area that has seen major improvement – hardware acceleration of video via the media engine that forms part of the integrated GPU found on these chips.

The big new feature is that this media engine now supports hardware acceleration of 4K HEVC content. Intel claims that this enables the mobile variant to support up to ten hours of 4K playback on a single battery charge; it can also encode a one hour 4K HEVC video in 12 minutes, vastly superior to the software encoding of 4K content of the past. Netflix fiends will also find the support for the latest security protocols means that only 7th Gen Core-powered PCs will support Netflix's 4K streaming (or you could just buy a $200 media streamer instead). There has also been an improvement to Intel's Speed Shift technology, allowing the CPU to more rapidly switch between low power/performance and high power/performance modes. As a result, Intel claims performance improvements up to 19% in basic desktop duties, but our PCMark 8 Home Accelerated test didn't show this at all – the slight performance boost seemed to align perfectly with the frequency increase.

If you thought the new 14nm+ process might lead this chip to being an overclocker's delight, think again. While we've only managed to hit 4.7GHz with our sample, a mere 200MHz increase over last year's i7-



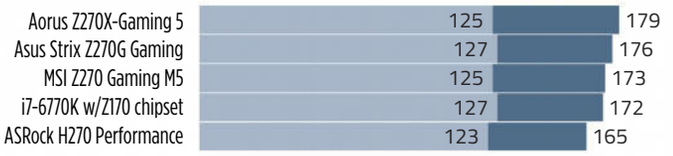
The manufacturing process has updated from 14nm to 14nm+. A plus sign is good, right?

Series 200 Benchmarks

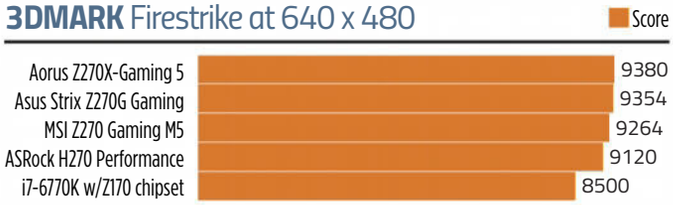
PCMARK 8 Home Accelerated

GRID AUTOSPORT

ULTRA DETAIL, 1024 X 768, 0XMSAA

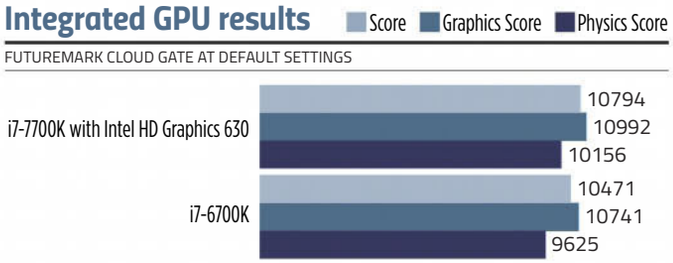

Min FPS
Avg FPS
Aorus Z270X-Gaming 5 125 179
Asus Strix Z270G Gaming 127 176
MSI Z270 Gaming M5 125 173
i7-6770K w/Z170 chipset 127 172
ASRock H270 Performance 123 165

3DMARK Firestrike at 640 x 480

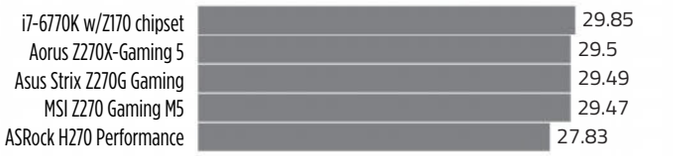


Integrated GPU results

FUTUREMARK CLOUD GATE AT DEFAULT SETTINGS

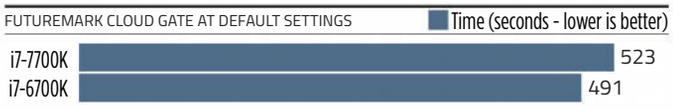


SISOFT SANDRA MEMORY


Aggregate Memory Performance (GB/s)
i7-6770K w/Z170 chipset 29.85
Aorus Z270X-Gaming 5 29.5
Asus Strix Z270G Gaming 29.49
MSI Z270 Gaming M5 29.47
ASRock H270 Performance 27.83

Handbrake H264 to H264 re-encode

FUTUREMARK CLOUD GATE AT DEFAULT SETTINGS



NOTE - Quick Sync is supported by H264 in Handbrake.

6700K's 4.5GHz, those who have hit 5GHz have seen the chip temperature soar to 100C, leading to thermal throttling.

As a result, we can't recommend an upgrade to this new CPU if you're rocking a 5th or 6th-gen Core CPU; the performance differences are minimal. On the plus side, it is backwards compatible with last year's 100 series chipset motherboards. Speaking of chipsets, Kaby Lake-S also comes with a new chipset, but once again the differences between this year's chipset and last year's are minimal.

THE INTEL 200 SERIES CHIPSET

There are six new chipsets debuting with Kaby-Lake S. Gamers will be most interested in the Z270 and H270 chipsets; the former is for power users who want to overclock and need more PCIe lanes, while the latter trims a few PCIe lanes back and removes official support for overclocking. Notice we said official? As usual, those sneaky motherboard manufacturers have enabled overclocking on the more affordable chipset, even though we've seen Intel's wrath at such attempts in the past. Don't expect them to emblazon their motherboard boxes with this information though; you'll have to dig deep to see if the H270 board you have in mind has overclocking support.

As far as PCIe lanes go, the new Z270 supports 24, while the H270 drops this to 20. The memory speed on the lesser board has also dropped a little, down from DDR4 2400MHz to DDR4 2133MHz. Yet, we've seen H270 boards promising DDR4 2400MHz support out of the box, making this a moot point. There will also be DDR3 versions of these chipsets, but if last year's 100 series is anything to go by, don't expect to see many motherboards hitting the market with this option.

If there's one major difference between the Z270 and H270, it's in the configuration of the PCIe to CPU lane configuration. The Z270 supports 1x16, 2x8, 1x8 + 2x4 configurations, making it suitable for Nvidia's SLI technology. However, the H270 is limited to just 1x16 lane, ruling out SLI for these boards. Thankfully the Z170 supports the full range of PCIe to CPU configurations, and sits somewhere between the Z270 and H270 in terms of pricing. However, it too only has 20 PCIe 3.0 lanes.

> "we can't recommend an upgrade to this new CPU if you're rocking a 5th or 6th-gen Core CPU"

As you can probably tell, as gamers we're once again underwhelmed by Intel's latest CPU and chipset. Yet we can totally understand their strategy; there's no need to pump huge amounts of R&D into their CPU architecture when there's no real competition in the gaming market. Which is why the launch of AMD's new CPU is going to be so exciting; finally we might see some real competition when it comes to raw CPU performance, which is what gamers care about. Until then, Intel's latest range is really only suitable for those upgrading from systems that are three or four years old.

MOTHERBOARD

Asus ROG Strix Z270G Gaming

Mini-form factor, maximum effort

PRICE $319
www.asus.com.au

When most of today's mobos from the big four are all so similar, it's nice to get something like this product in for review. It's the only board in our roundup that uses the mATX form factor, so is designed for mobile, smaller gaming rigs. Yet despite its small size, Asus has managed to pull a Tardis on this board, cramming in much more than you'd expect for such a small size.

There are two full length PCIe x16 lanes, so you can run SLI if you so desire, alongside twin PCIe x1 physical slots. Asus has stuck with the standard six SATA 6Gbps slots offered by the Z270 chipset, but also includes two M.2 ports for high speed SSDs, managing to do so by putting one of the ports on the rear of the board. There's even integrated Wi-Fi 802.11 a/b/g/n/ac which supports MU-MIMO for the latest routers. There are plenty of USB ports to go around, with four physical USB 3.0 ports included, along with twin USB 3.1, one of which is Type-C.

Sound is handled by Asus' SupremeFX solution, which is based on Realtek's latest S1220A codec. As expected it's been beefed up with premium capacitors, EMF shielding and twin headphone amps. HDMI and DP ports deliver output for the CPU's integrated GPU, while Asus' excellent BIOS design remains intact, offering easy overclocking. If you want to dive deep, there's a plethora of options for serious tweakers.

It might be rather pricey, but given the feature set for such a small board, it's one of the best bases for your mobile 7th Gen Core gaming rig. *BENNETT RING* PC

- Feature-rich
- Quality-audio
- Deep BIOS options for tweakers

- Rather expensive
- Form factor limits the range of peripherals

VERDICT:

This mATX board might look tiny, but it's got a huge range of features crammed into its tiny dimensions.

9

MOTHERBOARD

Aorus Z270X-Gaming 5

Gigabyte in disguise

PRICE $299
www.aorus.com

Despite trying to separate the Aorus brand from maker Gigabyte for several years, the company has now decided to use the Aorus brand as a moniker for its high-end gaming products. So this is actually a Gigabyte product, but it looks just like many other Z270 boards in this price point.

It's hard for mobo manufacturers to differentiate their products when their competitors are using the same chipset, aimed at the same price point. And it seems Aorus hasn't really done much to set itself apart from the pack. This ATX board packs three steel-reinforced PCIe x16 physical slots, along with another three x1 slots. It's covered in RGB lighting, and features an RGB header if you want to add even more... just like every other board in this price range.

We do appreciate the fan headers though, with support for high-amp (2A) water pumps and six separate temperature controllers that can be used to automatically control fan curves. While it calls its audio solution Sound Blaster X-Fi MB5, it's actually based on the same Realtek ALC 1220 codec of many of its competitors, and comes with the usual extras; if you want dedicated Creative sound hardware, you're going to have spend much more for the higher-end Aorus boards. However, it does support Gigabyte's swappable amp technology, so you can change the tone of your sound if you prefer. Twin Ethernet is also a nice addition, but there's no built-in Wi-Fi. There are two M.2 slots though, with an additional port for a U.2 based drive.

To be frank, there's not a lot that separates this board from similarly priced Z270 boards. As a result, we think your buying decision will probably come down to brand loyalty and aesthetics over everything else. *BENNETT RING* PC

- Triple NVMe PCI SSD support
- Additional ASMedia USB 3.1 controller
- Onboard overclocking buttons/display

- At this price, they're all much of a muchness

VERDICT:

In such a competitive crowd, there's not much more than the additional U.2 port and excellent fan controls that helps this board stand out.

8

MOTHERBOARD

ASRock Fatal1ty H270 Performance

Z270, Schmed 270

PRICE $195
www.asrock.com

It might be based on the perceived-to-be-inferior H270 chipset, but as our performance benchmarks show, you don't lose a lot of performance when moving to a board like this. At least $100 cheaper than its competition, it's a great platform for building a more affordable rig where things like SLI aren't a consideration.

While there are twin full-length PCIe 3.0 x16 physical slots, we should point out that the chipset limits one of them to running in x16 mode, while the other is stuck at x4. That's not a problem if SLI isn't something you're looking for, while another four PCIe x1 physical slots allow for plenty of peripherals. Due to the lower PCIe lane count compared to the Z270, you're going to have to cut back on a single M.2 high speed SSD, but there are still two Ultra M.2 slots included on the board.

Given the price, a single Intel I219V Ethernet port is more than respectable, but we were pleasantly surprised by the board's audio. Like its more expensive counterparts, it's using Realtek's ALC1220 codec, and sounds just as good as the rest. It doesn't have quite as many SATA 6Gbps ports as the likes of the Aorus, sticking to the default six offered by the H270. Yet there are plenty of USB ports, including a single USB 3.0 Type-C connection. To be clear, it's version 3.0 though, so only has half the bandwidth of 3.1 connections.

At just under two hundred bucks, this is fantastic value... and ASRock has even enabled overclocking of both the memory and CPU. Yep, it's quite the steal. *BENNETT RING* PC

- Cheap without a performance hit
- High-quality audio

- Slower than Z270
- No SLI support
- Lacks additional SATA ports

VERDICT:

For $200 you really can't go wrong with this board if you're intending to build an affordable 7th Gen Core system.

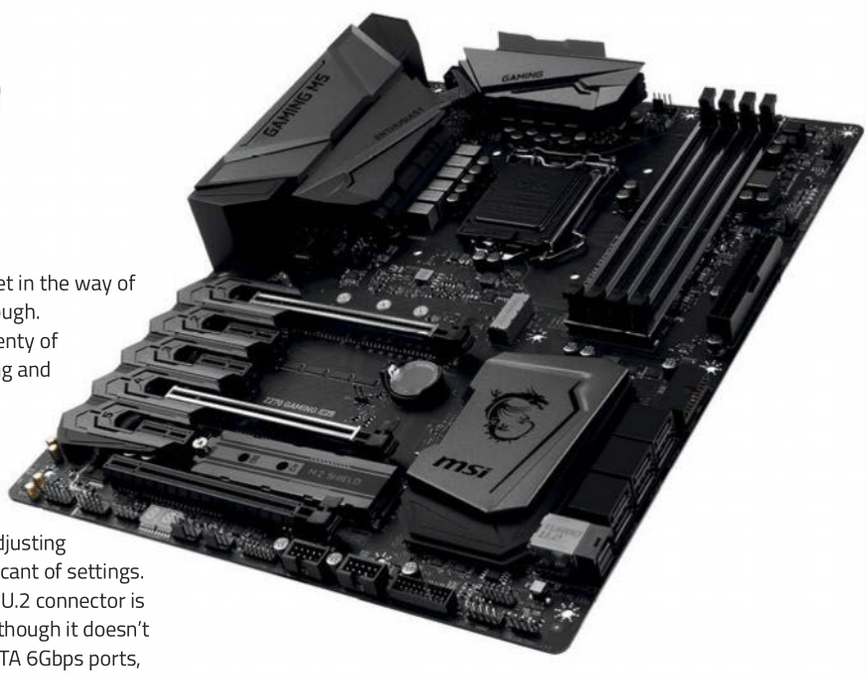
9

MOTHERBOARD

MSI Z270 Gaming M5

Heads or tails?

PRICE $329
www.msi.com



Thank you MSI, for delivering a super-slick black motherboard that will be aesthetically appeasing to those of us who prefer our PCs to look like a serious piece of machinery rather than mobile Karaoke machines. At this price, the MSI Z270 Gaming M5 is going head to head against the Aorus, so what else is different apart from its subtler design?

Well, not much. MSI was keen to emphasise the M.2 shield, as it appears that M.2 SSDs can throttle back under duress. It's basically a small heatplate that goes over an M.2 SSD. This board has similarly powerful and flexible fan controllers as the Aorus board, while the physical layout is also extremely similar. There are three full length PCIe x16 slots, though only two come with steel reinforcement, while another three x1 slots await your soundcards, capture cards and the like. We're a little concerned the plastic shroud around the PCIe slots might get in the way of certain peripherals though.

Obviously there's plenty of support for RGB lighting and additional strips, while the BIOS is up to MSI's usual high standards. Tweakers will delight at just how much time they can waste adjusting even the most insignificant of settings. Twin M.2 plus another U.2 connector is identical to the Aorus, though it doesn't have quite as many SATA 6Gbps ports, sticking to the default six. We're sure you can guess what's powering the audio subsystem – yep, Realtek's ALC1220 has been wheeled out once again.

With performance, features and pricing nigh on identical to the Aorus board, picking the right one could come down to a coin toss. *BENNETT RING* PC

- Excellent fan header support
- Nice slick design
- Twin M.2 plus U.2

- Here comes another one, just like the other one...

VERDICT:

At this price, the MSI Z270 Gaming M5 delivers exactly what we expected – a solid, feature-packed board that is very similar to other offerings.

8

MOUSE

Creative BlasterX Siege M04

Sound Blaster makes a noise

PRICE $99.95
au.creative.com

It seems as though everyone is getting into the peripherals market. Creative, the company better known for sound cards, external DACs, speakers and headphones have just released their first mouse and keyboard. While the company may be new to the gaming peripherals market, they still have ample experience with gamers, having worked with and sponsored pro gamers for years. This feedback seems to have worked well, as the Siege M04 is an excellent, well made gaming mouse that should appeal to a wide range of gamers. Under the hood sits a powerful 12,000 DPI, 1000Hz PixArt PMW3360 optical sensor, making for some fast and accurate mousing, without any acceleration. The design is nice and fits well in the hand, with a good click on the left and right. The seven buttons are well placed, but unfortunately the scroll wheel makes a surprising amount of noise and feels a little cheap. We here in the PCPP bunker aren't the biggest fans of throwing RGB lighting on everything, as more often than not it's just some meaningless flash that ups the price of the product, but in the case of the Siege M04 we're actually quite impressed with the implementation. As well as lighting up the logo on the palm rest of the mouse, the M04 also features an RGB strip around the base that looks great. If this is an indicator of what Creative can do with their first stab at a gaming mouse, we can't wait to see what they can do next. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- Fast and accurate
- Elegant RGB
- Comfortable

- Iffy mouse wheel

VERDICT:

An excellent, well made and elegant gaming mouse slightly let down by an iffy scroll wheel

9

MOUSE

Asus ROG Spatha

He ain't heavy, he's my Spatha

PRICE $219
www.asus.com.au

While many hardware vendors seem to be embracing the aesthetic of smaller and sleeker when it comes to mouse design, with the flagship mouse of a new range Asus has gone in the other direction. The Spatha is enormous and heavy, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Designed for MMORPGs, the Spatha is covered in buttons but is still very comfortable in the hand. The mouse is usable both wired and wirelessly, with the latter using a pairing/charging station and limiting the polling rate of the mouse to cut down on wireless lag. In wired mode, the Spatha is capable of a rather incredible, if somewhat impractical 2000Hz polling rate (1000Hz wireless), with up to 8200 DPI. It's strange to see the numbers so high given the target market of the mouse and the fact that it's big and heavy enough that it's not really particularly suitable for any kind of twitch gaming. The rather odd placement of the six thumb buttons also makes it a little clumsy for quick access during in MMO games.

Users are able to swap out the Omron switches for the left and right click if they so choose, but given the fact that the normal click is already quite stiff and the optional switches are even firmer, it's doubtful that too many people will make the effort. The fact that there's no option to fiddle with the weight is a little odd that the Spatha is so heavy in its default state. Still, it's accurate and smooth, and surprisingly comfortable for being so big. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- Well built
- Surprisingly comfortable
- Accurate

- Huge
- Very heavy
- Lacks purpose

VERDICT:

Huge and expensive, the Spatha is an odd product that is nice to use but not particularly suited for anything.

7

AUDIO

Asus ROG Centurion 7.1 Headset

How many drivers can dance on the head of a gamer?

PRICE $469
www.asus.com.au

Despite the headset looking something like an angry, hungover owl perched on your head, we did like a number of aspects of the previous Asus 7.1 headset, The Strix 7.1. The sound was excellent, and the base station/external DAC that the headset attached to had some very nice built-in features and presets. The Rog Centurion 7.1 is a rather excellent rethink of the idea, doing away with the wireless connection of the Strix 7.1 in favour of a cable, cutting down on both size and weight. While still being huge and heavy - an unfortunate necessity given the five drivers crammed into each earcup - the lighter, smaller Centurion 7.1 fits better on the head and has a better head strap, making the headset much more comfortable over long periods.

Sound quality is excellent, with good directionality to the surround sound and crisp, clear performance in all ranges otherwise. Having surround active when listening to a stereo source can add a hollow, effect to sound, but that's a problem endemic to surround sound headsets, both real and virtual. The breakout box/DAC is excellent, giving quick access to volume, levels and a few presets designed to highlight voice, gunshots or footsteps. It seems as though Asus has also fixed one of the niggling problems with the Strix 7.1. In the previous headset the active noise cancelling sometimes picked up the user's voice as being environmental noise and blocked it. Thankfully that doesn't appear to be a problem anymore. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- Great sound
- Fantastic base station
- Surprisingly comfortable

- Massively expensive
- Heavy
- Proprietary connectors

VERDICT:

An excellent real surround sound headset, but the increase of quality over virtual 7.1 doesn't really justify the huge price tag.

8

THRONE

ZQ Alien-series gaming chair

Built to last, and to play a lot of games in

PRICE $459
www.zqracing.com.au

Since we first got this chair last year, ZQ has been offering it 'on sale'. It's usually priced at $499, but the current price is $459. It's a lot of pay for a chair, but the chair you get is likely to easily outlast not only your gaming PC as it currently stands, but also your desk.

As you'd expect, though, you have to put it together first, and this is the one area where the impressive build quality of the Alien works against it. Putting it together by myself, it was at times a literal balancing act to get everything fitting properly while it was invariably braced in place by body parts, and even once my over-inquisitive cat. But, once together, I don't think I've ever owned a piece of furniture quite so fit for purpose.

The Alien sits on a heavy, all-metal wheeled base which helps it remain in place as you jerk about in motion while racing or shooting newbs. Its bucket-style seat almost wraps around you, offering support for lower back, head, and neck (thanks to two removable pillow-style supports). The comfortable arms can be moved up and down, back and forward, and even angled in or out – getting them just right for your own build and your desk is a breeze.

But most importantly, it's damn comfy to game in, work in, or just generally schlub about it in. I've been playing looong sessions of the Mass Effect series in the run-up to Andromeda, and I doubt I could have done it without an Alien to sit on. *DAVID HOLLINGWORTH* PC

- Sturdy construction
- Five different colours
- Adjustable arms

- Rather large in small apartments
- Expensive

VERDICT:

If you can justify the price, this is an excellent addition for any gamer who spends long hours cramped over their keyboard and mouse.

9

INPUT

Scuf Infinity controller

Infinity dollars

PRICE STARTS AT $219.95
bluemouthdirect.com/collections/scuf

Scuf controllers are good. There is no doubt of that. They are well constructed, comfortable and highly modifiable, but despite that they are something of a hard sell as they are hugely expensive, even before calculating in the costs of any parts for customisation. In the US there are a huge number of options for each controller when it comes to look and base parts, but because of the size of the Australian market, and our distance from the rest of the world, that is not the case here. In Australia the Scuf controller instead comes in a couple of base options and a couple of base colours. It's a fair trade off for the most part, but given the price point for the controllers in Australia – between $220 and $320 (without any modifications) you'd hope for a somewhat more expansive range.

The Xbox One/PC version of the controller comes in two basic forms, Basic and Pro, each with a few colour and print choices. The major difference between the Basic and Pro models is the inclusion of tools for customisation of the controller, the first being a small magnet used for remapping the four paddles on the back of the controller. By default these paddles are locked to preset buttons, but by placing the magnet on a small spot on the back of the controller users can remap the paddles to different buttons. A tiny allen key is also included with the Pro. This is used to switch the triggers between having a normal pull length and being hair triggers. It's a nice touch but the process is fiddly, and if you don't have the best eyes, trying to find the tiny pinhole to insert the allen key is a task and a half.

On top of the basic options, there are deeper options for customisation, including different precision thumbsticks, long braided cables, and precision triggers and grips (to essentially upgrade a Basic model to a Pro). The Controller itself feels good and solid in the hand, and the paddles have a nice resistance and click to them, but despite that fact it's a little hard to recommend the Scuf Infinity controller to PC users. It's a controller aimed at and partnered with the pro gaming world, and in that venue it's an excellent controller, but for PC gamers it's an extravagance. It's doubtful that a PC pro gamer will use a controller for anything, and for the games that a PC gamer might use a controller for, the level of customisation (not to mention the price) is over the top. The fact that the Xbox One Elite controller has most of the customisation options of the Scuf (in Australia at least) and costs around $50 less than the cheapest Scuf Infinity option makes its place in the market even more niche.

> "a controller aimed at and partnered with the pro gaming world, but for PC gamers it's an extravagance"

The Scuf controller is good. It's accurate and comfortable and solid, but at between $220 and $320, it essentially prices itself out of the controller market. Pro console gamers will definitely be interested, but your average punter would be better off looking elsewhere. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- Excellent build quality
- Lots of customisation
- Nice Paddles

- Seriously expensive
- Pro gamer focussed

VERDICT:

The Scuf Infinity is a great controller for console pro gaming but has minimal use to the PC gamer

5

INPUT

Creative BlasterX Vanguard K08

Not entirely imPRESsed

PRICE $229.95
au.creative.com

The Siege M04, the new gaming mouse from Creative is excellent, but it's a fairly safe first stab at the mouse market. With the Vanguard K08, Creative is not playing it safe. Not by a long shot. Rather than opting to go with the well-known and widely accepted keys of a brand like Cherry or Kailh, Creative has instead opted to work with switch maker Omron to create their own unique mechanical switches. The PRES keys (Perceive-React-Execute Switch) have an actuation of 45g - the same as Cherry Brown and Red - but a throw distance of only 1.5mm. It's a linear switch so there is no mechanical actuation point or noise; it's just straight up and down. The feel of the switch is a little hard to describe. It feels somewhat similar the excellent Romer-G switch from Logitech, but are a little stiffer and springier. If you didn't know the switch was mechanical you might think that it's a good example of high end scissor membrane. That's not necessarily a bad thing but not necessarily what you want from a mechanical switch.

The body of the keyboard is plastic but very sturdy, and the row or macro keys down the left hand side immediately identify it as a gaming keyboard. To the right are some good, straightforward media controls that appear to be compatible with just about everything you can throw at them. As expected with anything labelled gaming, the Vanguard K08 features RGB lighting that can be customised through drivers. Not a bad first stab at a gaming keyboard overall. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- Good build quality
- Fast switches
- Quiet

- Feels a bit membraney
- High price tag

VERDICT:

A pretty good first attempt at a gaming keyboard, but the new switch seems to have driven up the price significantly

8

CAM

Creative BlasterX Senz3D

Voice and gesture control are features, I guess?

PRICE $349.95
au.creative.com

Calling the new Senz3D a webcam is a bit of a misnomer. Thanks to the integration of Intel RealSense as well as a noise cancelling microphone, the unit is a lot more than just a webcam, but whether or not you'll use much of the extra functionality is debatable for most users. The camera has a few uses that are handy, outside of Skype calls that is, right off the bat. The camera can accurately scan faces so works well with Windows Hello for hands free login. The microphone is surprisingly sensitive and features decent ambient noise cancellation, making it good for Skype calls and gaming chat – so long as the game isn't too bombastic. The fact that the camera can judge depth also allows it to easily cut out the background for streaming or recording.

Outside of these purposes, it's debatable how much users will get out of the RealSense camera. It's a cool bit of technology, but its actual usefulness to most gamers will be questionable at best. You can take scans of things for 3D printing and interact with the PC through gesture control, but given that gesture controls are anathema to how people usually interact with computers, the usefulness is questionable at best. The mic also allows for voice control, but outside of Cortana, a feature that usually seems to be turned off in Windows 10, is there any real use? The Senz3D is a good webcam with a host of features, but these features just up the price point rather than its usability. Some people may get a lot from it, but it's doubtful the majority will. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- Feature packed
- Background removal
- Cool tech

- Niche or unsupported features

VERDICT:

Packed with features that justify the high price tag, but too specialised to justify a purchase

7

CES® 2017

BENNETT RING makes his first trip to the Candy Eating Store

▲ **TPCAST brings a wireless solution to the Vive**

In almost twenty years of technology coverage, I've never actually made it to the Consumer Electronics Show, aka CES, which is held in Las Vegas every January. Held on the 4th of January, I'm generally catching up with family at the time, so have always given it a miss. This year I decided it was about darned time to see what the fuss is all about – this is the biggest gadget-show on the planet, covering a vast array of technologies, including TVs, home automation, drones, and basically any other device that requires electricity to operate. 2017 was the year I finally decided to check out this mega-show (thanks to the kind folk from Dell for sending me over), and to say I was unprepared for the scope of the show is like saying Trump isn't ready to be the President of the US. While the focus of the show isn't PC technology, there's certainly plenty of cool stuff in spades, including huge dedicated areas for both gaming and VR.

With almost 4000 different exhibitors spread over 2.47 million net square feet of booth space, and around 180,000 visitors, I spent two days rushing through the main halls at break-neck pace, taking snapshots of the cooler gadgets I figured you folks would like to hear about. And trust me, there were plenty. From noise cancelling ear-buds that can be adjusted to drown out specific sounds, to Quantum LED gaming monitors, to high-end gaming PCs, I felt like a kid in a candy shop. I could spend an entire magazine talking about all of the cool new tech that will help to entertain and enrich our lives this year (not to mention drain our bank accounts), as well as a lot of needless bunk that's simply never going to be released, but instead I'm going to focus on the key technologies that made me feel tingly in just the right spots.

VIRTUAL REALITY REALLY IS A REALITY.

It might surprise you to know that HTC and Oculus aren't the only VR players in town – there were at least 50 exhibitors showing off their VR-related devices at the show. A huge portion of these were aimed at the smartphone crowd, with very affordable headsets that use today's smartphones as the primary display. Obviously the experience is very different to a $1400 Vive hooked up to a $2000 PC, but the sheer number of VR vendors at the show indicates that we're on a precipice where VR is going to become a part of mainstream life.

Sadly there was no sign of the second gen of Rift or Vive devices on the show-floor, though I'm sure there were a few behind-closed-doors demonstrations of upcoming replacements for last year's headsets. Magic Leap also decided to keep its upcoming retinal projection device hush-hush, which was a shame. However, of the many VR devices I saw, two that tickled my fancy the most were kits that unleash today's HMD from the umbilical cords they use to connect to your PC. The first is TPCAST's wireless add-on kit for the Vive, which was announced a couple of months ago, and is selling for around US$220. At CES, competitor KwikVR from 3D cloud solutions debuted its own tetherless solution, which will work with both the Rift and Vive. It's a small box that can connect to either HMD, and is then worn on a belt. A USB dongle plugs into your PC, while a small router connects to your existing router. However, it must operate on the 5GHz spectrum to deliver the necessary bandwidth, so bear that in mind. KwikVR promises that the latency introduced by the system is less than 12ms (the TPCAST kit does it under 2ms), while the battery life is around four hours. Expect it to release in early March for around US$300, but given the additional latency I'm leaning towards the TPCAST as the superior solution. In VR, latency is King, and adding another 10ms could be just enough to push you towards the bucket.

There's one slight issue with both kits though; the Rift and Vive both come with lengthy HDMI/USB cords already attached to the headset, so you're going to have to wrap them

▲ **KwikVR was just one of more than 50 VR exhibitors at CES**

▲ **Integrated audio that actually sounds good? Surely not.**

around your belt while using the unwired connection. There's also the issue of getting a little bit too excited *(! - Ed.)* while walking around your playable space – at least with a tether you know when you're getting a little too close to the wall. Finally, while it hasn't been confirmed yet, the Rift is going to need the accompanying Touch controller to enable full-room tracking capabilities, making the tether a bit of a moot point at the moment. Still, tether-less VR should be a liberating experience, especially if you've got the space to make the most of it.

DELL - ALL ABOUT THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE

Let's face facts. Until now, if you were in the market for an All-in-One PC, you had to make certain quality compromises. Whether it was a low-performance CPU, average graphics or terrible sound quality, AIOs have always had to make some kind of sacrifice to fit all of those components into what is basically a chubby monitor. With the advent of low-power CPUs that still deliver excellent performance, the CPU problem has been solved. Integrated graphics have meant that these machines can now handle HD video without issue, though they're still not quite ready for the likes of Battlefront or Total War; Overwatch on the other hand should be fine thanks to the AMD Radeon R9 M485X option available for the new XPS 27.

One issue that has always been particularly appalling though is sound quality, and Dell has poured 18 months of development into its latest AIO to solve this issue. The new XPS 27 has sound quality that rivals a $500 sound bar – trust me, I did listening tests in an acoustic chamber to put it through its paces. Dell has teamed up with Emmy-award winning music producer Jack Joseph Puig, who has worked with the likes of the Rolling Stones, Dire Straits and a bunch of other huge bands, to deliver an AIO that finally doesn't sound like rubbish. To do so they've packed ten individual drivers into the XPS 27. There are four full-range drivers, twin tweeters for the high-end, a couple of low-end radiators to give some punchy bass, wrapped up with two downward firing speakers that reflect the sound up from the desk to envelop the user in a bubble of high-quality audio. To be frank, I've never heard an integrated PC sound solution that comes close to this baby, be it an AIO or laptop. There's also a lovely 17-inch 4K touch screen to round out the package.

Dell also unveiled the world's first VR-ready mobile workstation, a behemoth of a laptop called the Precision 7720. If you're going to be building virtual worlds on the move, this bad-boy has you covered. Sporting Xeon processors and Pascal-powered Quadro graphics cards, I'm pretty sure this thing isn't going to be cheap, but it is incredibly powerful for a mobile workstation.

Finally, Dell also showed off its latest Inspiron gaming notebooks. Unlike the Alienware brand, which is aimed at the ultra-high end of gaming, Inspiron is focusing on the masses. The new 15 7000 is a 15-inch laptop that includes a GeForce GTX 1050 or 1050Ti, along with a meaty processor starting with the latest 7th Gen Core i5 and i7 processors. What is most impressive is the price; starting at around AU$1100, this mainstream gamer promises to deliver playable performance at a palatable price.

QUANTUM DOTS – THE NEW OLED-BEATER?

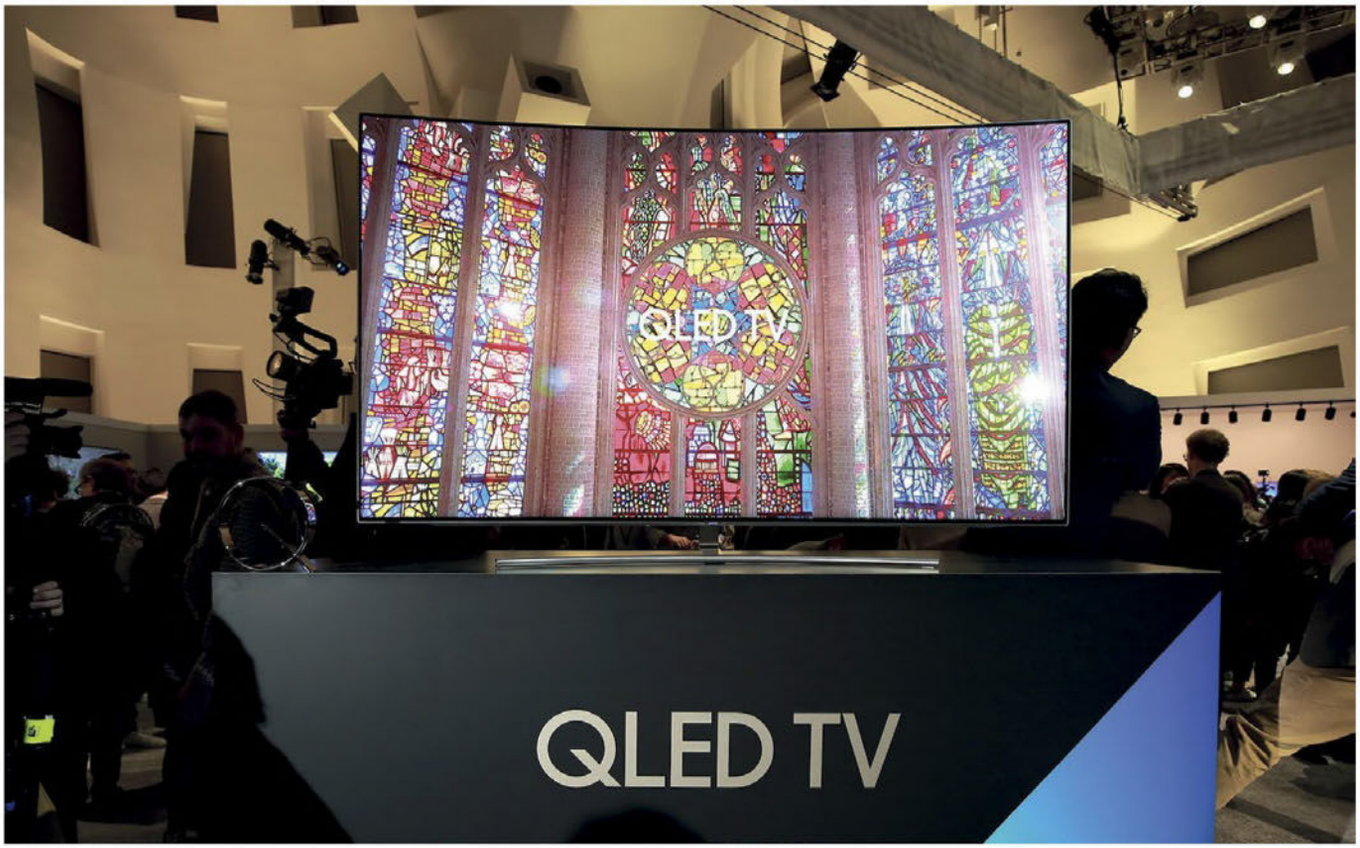
Aiming to be an OLED beater is the latest in LCD technology, known as Quantum LED. I saw these new screens in action at the Samsung stand, and while I'm not fully convinced they're superior to OLED, the fact that they're based on LCD technology should make them more affordable. Debuting in Samsung's new Q9 and Q8 series, they're based on Quantum Dot technology, which delivers deep blacks that rival OLED, without the problem of pixel-degradation over time. They're also incredibly bright, delivering between 1500 and 2000 nits in peak playback, which is absolutely necessary to meet the requirements of High Dynamic Range displays. In comparison, OLEDs only hit around 600 nits on a good day, which makes them more suitable to darker viewing spaces. Samsung has also focused on minimising input lag, which has been a bit of an issue with 4K TVs in the past, with a PR rep claiming it was almost non-existent, though they didn't have any figures to quote at the time.

Gamers will love the full Steam link integration; it's built right into the TV, so you don't need to buy a separate Steam link box to stream your games from the PC to the TV. Apparently you won't even need a dongle for the Steam controller either, as there's an integrated receiver for this. Unlike today's chunky HDMI cables, Samsung also debuted its new "invisible" optical cable. It's not quite invisible, but at just a few millimetres thick it's a far cry from the snake-like cables we have to deal with today.

The good news is that this technology isn't limited to just TVs – it's also being employed in Samsung's new range of gaming displays. The CH711 Quantum Dot curved monitor employs the same technology of its high-end displays, but in a 27-inch or 31.5-inch curved panel designed for gamers. It's not quite 4K though, topping out at 2560 x 1440, yet its colour clarity can't be called into question, with 125% sRGB colour coverage. Not only will this make your games pop, it also makes it ideal for professional designers. There's no word on price yet, but given how good the image quality appeared to be, along with the lack of perceptible motion blur, I'm guessing it's not going to be exactly cheap.

▲ **Steam link is integrated so there's no need for a separate box**

▼ **Samsung wants you to stop worshipping at the OLED altar.**



DRONING ON ABOUT DRONES

While they may not be related to PC gaming, there's no denying that us geeks find drones pretty damn cool. With several hundred new models on display, there's simply too many to cover in detail here, so I'll highlight a few that I found to be the coolest. The best by far was a submersible drone designed for fishing and fish viewing, called the PowerRay. It's basically a remote controlled submarine that can dive down to 30 metres, and uses a sonar system to locate fish within a 40m range. To achieve this range it uses a tether, so you can always haul it up if things go pear-shaped. The operator can see exactly what's going on thanks to the built-in video camera; once they've manoeuvred the drone close to a school of fish, a tap of a button extends a remote arm with a hook and bait. It's even got a small light on the arm to lure fish towards the bait. Sure, it sounds like shooting fish in a barrel, but when you're as bad at fishing as I am, any assistance to make the job easier – not to mention even more enjoyable – is appreciated.

While most drones continue to focus on improved battery life and range, there was also a huge increase in the number of "micro-drones", which measure just a few millimetres across. They're going to be very cheap and resilient, though their small size does make them prone to air currents. As you can see from the photo, some of these can land in the palm of your hand. Even more amazing is that some of these microdrones include a 720p camera.

Many of the drones at the show also included stereo cameras for VR operation. Instead of looking at your drone's camera via your smartphone or controller, strap on a HMD and you are the drone. I think this is going to lead to a huge increase in the popularity of drone racing, not to mention general drone exploration.

TRUE SURROUND SOUND

As gamers, we love to be enveloped in the exquisite soundscapes created by the talented sound designers who spend years crafting a perfect audio experience. A decent set of surround sound headphones does a relatively good job of imitating a 360 degree experience, but if you're truly serious about your game sound, a 5.1 or 7.1 setup was the only way to go… until now. Dolby's Atmos system made a huge splash at the show, as it incorporates extra speakers that pump sound from the ceiling. There are a couple of ways of doing this; by far the most elaborate is to install dedicated speakers into your ceiling. However, I saw several new speaker systems at the show that used standard front left/right speakers with special upwards firing speakers mounted on top. This fires the audio waves up to the ceiling, bouncing them back down onto the listener. But by far the most impressive Atmos devices were a range of new sound bars that do a damn good job of creating a 360 degree bubble of audio from a single sound bar under your display.

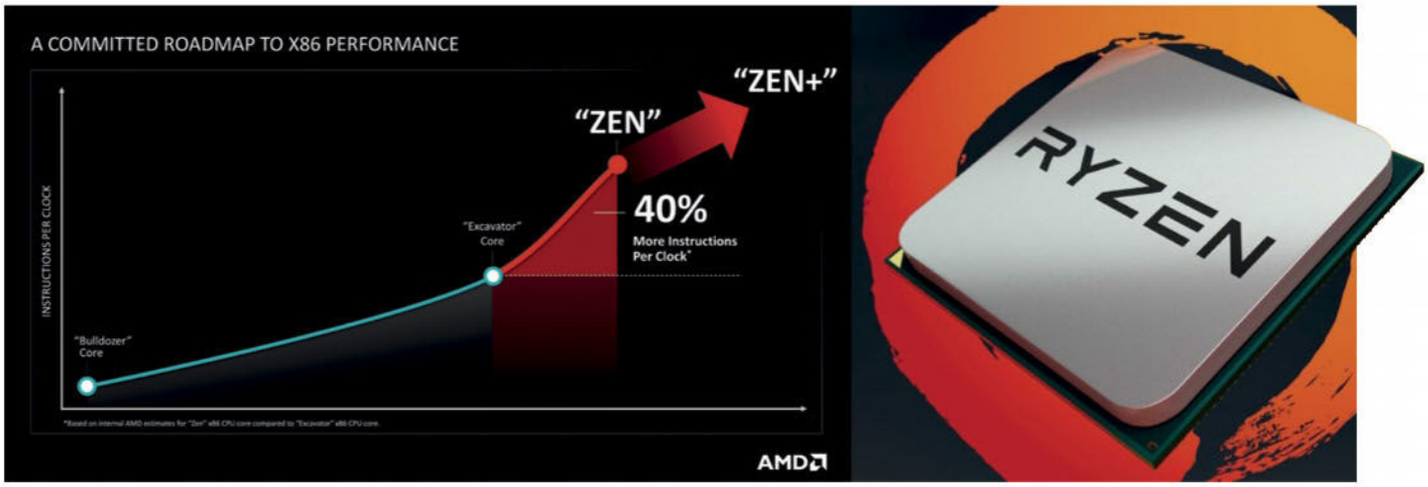
In the past, I'd recommend listening to your sound system via tin cans connected by string rather than a sound bar, but the technology has progressed immensely in the last few years. One of the best was Sony's new HT-ST5000 sound bar, which was demoed in a relatively sound-proof suite. To be immersed from all directions by a single sound bar (it does have a separate amp to pump up the bass) was a very impressive experience. During the demo, I could hear helicopters flying overhead, while birds in the forest chirped behind me. Now, it's not *quite* as good as a true Atmos system with discrete speakers, but it comes damn close. There's one huge caveat with these sound bars though. They were all demoed in relatively small, square rooms, with very little furniture. This obviously allows the various speakers in the sound bar to bounce audio off the walls and ceiling. Move one of these sound bars to a large open plan living space, cluttered with couches, coffee tables and lamps, and I'm pretty sure the experience won't be quite as mind blowing. However, if you game in a small square room, I'd highly recommend checking out these new Atmos sound bars as an affordable way to get one of the best gaming listening experiences around.

▲(above left) The submersible PowerRay (above) An Apex "micro-drone"

AMD RESTARTS THE CPU WARS

As you'll see elsewhere in this issue, Intel's new Kaby Lake processors are pretty much par for the course when it comes to Intel gaming CPU releases. Offering a fraction more performance than last year's Sky Lake CPU, there's really not a lot here to compel gamers to upgrade. However, AMD looks set to shake things up in a major way, releasing a raft of information about its upcoming CPU architecture at this year's CES. The chip is codenamed Ryzen, and uses new CPU cores known as Zen. The new architecture promises to boost raw CPU performance over

▼Sony's HT-ST5000 sound bar utilises Dolby's Atmos system



▲ **40% sounds like a lot, but it still puts AMD behind Intel CPUs**

its existing design by a huge 40%. There will apparently be three different versions – a quad-cored SR3, a six-cored SR5 and an opta-cored SR7. It seems none of these will ship with integrated graphics, unlike Intel's chips, which accounts for around 30% of the silicon used in today's 7th Gen core chips. This means AMD can put more transistors to use for raw CPU performance, and as gamers that's music to our ears. While DX12 promises to allow us to utilise Intel's iGPUs alongside our beastly discrete GPUs, the reality is that this technology is quite a long way off, so we're still sticking with our graphics cards for the time being.

If the 40% performance boost is true, it'll put AMD's latest chips just a tiny bit behind Intel's CPUs. Yet we know that AMD is always extremely aggressive when it comes to pricing, so we could see the reinvigoration of affordable CPUs that deliver top-shelf gaming performance. And that could be just the kick in the pants that Intel needs to stop releasing products that offer a mere 6% or so more performance than the previous year's product. With a release date in the next few weeks, I can't wait to get my mitts on AMD's new CPUs, and you can be sure PC PowerPlay will be diving deep into their gaming performance.

CHERRY SILENT SWITCHES

If you're reading this article, there's a pretty high chance that your gaming keyboard is packing Cherry switches; I'm writing it on a Corsair keyboard equipped with Cherry Red keys. Gamers love their tactility, reliability and responsiveness, but there's been one trade-off in the form of excessive key noise. If you live with other gamers who own Cherry keyboards, as I do, you'll know just how loud these suckers can be late at night. So it was with much delight that I stumbled upon Cherry's tiny booth and discovered their brand new range of Cherry Silent switches.

While these have been around for a while now, it's only as of this year that every keyboard manufacturer has access to them, as they were exclusive to Corsair for the last year. The Silent version will be available in both Cherry MX Silent and Cherry MX Silent RGB. As for their feel, they'll be offered in both Red and Black models, and my demo showed that they felt just the same, albeit at a much lower operating volume. Your housemates will no doubt be rushing to the local store to buy you one of these new keyboards equipped with Silent keys, so that your late night raiding sessions don't keep them up all night.

▼ **Cherry Silent switches are a godsend for Bennett's housemate**

AND THAT'S A WRAP

As my first CES, I was totally unprepared for the sheer scale of this show. With just two days to explore the show floor, there was a lot that I missed, but I think I managed to hone in on the stuff that you folks will find more interesting. I'll definitely be heading back next year, with a few extra days to explore. But even with my brief glimpse this year, it was exciting to see how quickly audio and video technology, as well as VR, are evolving. As key components in the gaming experience, 2017 looks set to deliver gaming that is richer, more immersive and sounding better than ever. Provided you can tear yourself away from your remote controlled fishing drone…

David Hollingworth with Lenovo and Corsair's new PC gaming gear

We were guests of both Corsair and Lenovo at this year's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, and both companies had some pretty impressive new gaming gear to show off.

Corsair didn't have a huge lineup of new stuff, but it was certainly perfectly formed.

Even though we still haven't seen much of the first Bulldog PC kit in this country, there's now a 2.0 version of the DIY PC. The bare bones kit comes with Hydro Series H6 SF liquid cooling on the CPU, an SF600 PSU, and a motherboard built around the Z270 chipset. Everything else you have to supply, and it retails for $US399. There are bundled versions that give you everything you need, but not outside of the US.

The Bulldog's never really excited us, but that's not true of Corsair's excellent gaming peripherals. They're now joined by the MOBA-tastic Scimitar Pro gaming mouse and very shiny K95 RGB Platinum gaming keyboard.

The Scimitar Pro features a 16,000dpi optical sensor that can be fine-tuned for any mousepad, RGB lighting across four distinct zones, and on-board storage for macro recordings and timer-countdowns. The big draw is 12 programmable buttons set into the mouse's left side, on a sliding panel so you can set it just so. It's available in nature's warning colours - yellow and black - and will cost $US89.

▲ The Lenovo Legion Y720 sports an integrated Xbox One controller receiver

▲ Lenovo's Legion Y520 is designed for both mainstream and enthusiast players

The K95 Platinum is Corsair's most tricked out keyboard yet. It comes with either the Cherry MX RGB Speed switch or a more conventional Brown switch, has the usual tough aluminium chassis, and 8MB of onboard storage for macros and lighting profiles. Speaking of macros, the board boasts six dedicated macro keys on the left-hand side. Of course, it's lit like a casino on the Vegas strip, with per-key dynamic lighting, and the new LightEdge feature - a light bar with 19 distinct zones that stretches the entire length of the keyboard, and an array of funky effects. This one will set you back $US199.

▲ The K95 Platinum RGB, Scimitar Pro and Bulldog 2.0 were the focus of Corsair's peripheral range

While Corsair was all about the peripherals and expanding on established brands, Lenovo broke out into new territory entirely, with the Lenovo Legion brand of gaming laptops.

Apart from being astoundingly alliterative, the new brand is the culmination of years of community consultation, and the first products to wear the new moniker are the Lenovo Legion Y720 Laptop and Lenovo Legion Y520 Laptop.

Both are designed with mainstream and enthusiast players in mind, and feature a range of gaming-focused features. Dolby Atmos sound provides an immersive audio experience, while the latest 7th gen Core I processors from Intel bring computing grunt to the fore. The latest Nvidia graphics deliver not only gaming but - in the case of the Y720, with its GTX 1060 GPU - also VR power, and both models boast 16GB of RAM.

The Y720 model also hosts a Thunderbolt 3 port for super-fast plug and play transfers, and a UHD (3840 x 2160) IPS anti-glare display. Both models also feature a full RGB keyboard (of course), while the Y720 can also brag about an integrated Xbox One controller wireless receiver. That's actually a pretty cool feature right there.

Both the Lenovo Legion Y520 and Y720 will be available in Australia in March. The Y520 will retail for $1999, while the more up-gunned Y720 will set gamers back $2699. PC

HOTWARE 259

with Terrence Jarrad

01 Nintendo Switch

$469.95 ▪ Nintendo

www.nintendo.com

What happens when a home gaming console is also your portable gaming console?

POWERED UP: 720p touchscreen that clicks into base station to hook up to your TV, then unplugs and lets you continue gaming on the go.

PLAYED OUT: Rather ordinary battery life of 2+ hours, powers barely current-gen-quality games. Speaking of which, there's really only the new Zelda worth playing on launch, and it's on Wii U as well. Oh and enjoy paying a monthly fee for online play access. Very expensive when you consider the other consoles that money can buy.

02 Elago Vintage Stand

$40 ▪ Elago

www.elagostore.eu

Here's something to make you regret buying an Apple watch a little less! It's a cute stand modelled after the classic Macintosh computer

POWERED UP: Charges your watch while you watch, with nightstand mode turning it into a bedside clock. Is made of silicone so it shouldn't scratch up your expensive wrist-weight, and features a tiny cable management channel so it'll sit flat and the cable doesn't get in the way. Available in beige and black.

PLAYED OUT: Played out? This? This is the most useful thing you can do with an Apple watch!

03 Mission One PC

$330 ▪ Endless

endlessos.com

Not your standard PC, the Mission One was designed to be affordable for those who normally would not be able to purchase a PC.

POWERED UP: Cased in sustainable bamboo, the dual core Celeron with 2GB RAM and a 500GB HDD, powers Endless OS, a Linux based operating system with a simple smartphone-like interface with over 100 free and useful apps like Libre Office.

PLAYED OUT: The price is in NUC territory, or even a cheap DIY build (though OS and software would push it past).

04 Razer Project Valerie

$TBA ▪ Razer

razerzone.com

Anyone who regularly uses multiple screens will tell you that one of the worst things about laptops on the go is losing that extra viewable area. Razer isn't sure why that needs to be the case, so came up with Project Valerie.

POWERED UP: Three 17" 4k G-Sync screens in a portable package that's essentially powered by the internals of a Razer Blade Pro, including GTX 1080 GPU and 32GB of RAM.

PLAYED OUT: Living the land of concept, for now, though it would probably come in close to $10,000 AUD if current Razer Blade Pro prices are anything to go by, and weigh in the realm of 5kg.

05 Laundroid

$TBA ▪ Seven Dreamers

Laundroid.sevendreamers.com

You know what sucks? Doing laundry. It's so DULL. Well, never fear, because Seven Dreamers partnered with Panasonic and had seven very vivid dreams about some kind of cupboard robot that folds laundry.

POWERED UP: It's some kind of cupboard robot that folds laundry! It uses internal cameras to see what the clothing is before folding it. And pre-orders will be open in March!

PLAYED OUT: It takes 5-10 minutes to fold a t-shirt. A, singular. T-shirt. That is so many minutes for that task.

HYPER
ESPORTS SPECIAL | ON-SALE NOW

INVENTORY

THE BEST BUILD FOR EVERY BUDGET

The release of Kaby Lake hasn't really inspired us to change up the CPUs of our machines. Hopefully in a few months we might see an AMD powered Beast.

MODEM ROUTERS

For all rational budgets

BUDGET

TP-Link VR600
$179 *tp-link.com*
Not the fastest, but it's stable, well priced and feature packed. ADSL modem built in

Synology Router RT1900ac
$199 *synology.com*
No built in ADSL modem, but it's fast and has the best interface around

PREMIUM

NETGEAR R8000 Nighthawk X6 Tri-Band WiFi Router
$300 *netgear.com.au*
Formerly our pick for the Beast, this router is more than powerful and fast enough for all your gaming needs

LAPTOPS

Gaming on the go

BUDGET

Gigabyte P55W v5
$2099 *gigabyte.com.au*
If you want real gaming performance in a laptop, $2k is where it starts

PREMIUM

Metabox Prime-X
$6899 *metabox.com.au*
The fastest laptop around costs big

BUDGET

The perfect entry-level gaming PC

CPU
AMD FX-6300 6 Core Black Edition Processor
$155 *amd.com*
AMD still has the punch to compete in the budget range

MOBO
Asrock 970-PR03 R2.0 Motherboard
$109 *asrock.com.au*
A cheap home for AMD's cheap gaming CPU

RAM
G.Skill-NT 8GB Single DDR3 1600
$45 *gskill.com*
8GB is plenty for our entry-level rig

VIDEO
Asus GTX 1050 Dual Edition
$219 *asus.com.au*
The best price/power conversion around

POWER
Cooler Master Thunder 500W
$59 *coolermaster.com*
The budget beast doesn't need a lot of juice

SOUND
Cougar Immersa
$59 *cougargaming.com*
Incredible performance and comfort for a shoestring price

STORAGE
1TB 7200RPM HDD (any) $63
The cheapest 1Tb drive should house a good 50 games

DISPLAY
AOC e2450Swh LED Monitor
$179 *aocmonitorap.com/anz*
24" and 2ms response for under $200?

CASE
NZXT S340
$97 *NZXT.com*
Beauty on a real budget

KEYBOARD
Tt eSPORTS Challenger
$55 *thermaltake.com.au*
Built for PC gamers – macros, shortcuts, the lot

MOUSE
Rapoo V20 Optical Gaming Mouse
$35 *rapoo.com*
The disco mouse is a pleasure to use and looks great

TOTAL: **$1,055**

PERFORMANCE

Most bells and whistles, without breaking the bank

CPU
Intel 5th Generation Core i5-6600K + Noctua NH-D15
$365 + $115 *intel.com*

MOBO
Asus Z170 Pro Gaming
$259 *asus.com.au*
Our fave affordable Z170 board

RAM
HyperX HX421C14FB2K2 16GB DDR4 2133MHz
$101 *hyperxgaming.com*
16GB at a great price

VIDEO
Gainward GeForce GTX 1070 Phoenix "GLH"
$689 *gainward.net*
Better performance than a Titan for under $700

POWER
Corsair VS650
$85 *corsair.com*
This affordable PSU delivers a clean and reliable source of energy

SOUND
Edifier Luna Eclipse speakers + Kingston HyperX Cloud Revolver headset $265 + $149
edifier.com/au/ www.kingston.com

STORAGE
OCZ Trion 480GB + 2TB HDD (any)
$195 + $95 *ocz.com*
A speedy gaming drive + heaps of storage

DISPLAY
AOC G2460PG
$565
aocmonitorap.com/v2015/au
24" of 144Hz, G-Sync glory

CASE
Fractal Design Define R5
$169 *fractal-design.com*
Our new favourite mid-tower

KEYBOARD
Steelseries Apex M500 $150 *steelseries.com*
One of the best mechanical keyboards we've ever used

MOUSE
Tt esports Level 10M
$89.95
au.ttesports.com
Our new fave mouse

TOTAL: **$3,291.95**

ASUS®
No.1 in Quality & Services
- The Wall Street Journal Asia
RT-AC5300
Wireless-AC5300
Tri-Band Gigabit Router

THE BEAST

When overkill is barely enough...

CPU

Intel 6th Generation Core i7 6700K + XSPC RayStorm D5 RX240 V3 Water Cooling Kit

$525 + $587 *intel.com www.pccasegear.com.au*

You want power, here's real power

MOBO

MSI Z170A XPower Gaming Titanium Edition

$499 *msi.com*

Sexy, silver and super fast

RAM

Corsair Vengeance LPX 3600MHz 2 x 8GB with cooler

$399 *corsair.com*

That high speed will show real gains in large open world games

VIDEO

MSI GeForce GTX Sea Hawk EK X

$2618 *au.msi.com*

Sure, you'll need a custom water loop in your system, but you'll get top performance at utter silence in return

POWER

Silverstone 1500wST1500 Strider

$314 *silverstone.com*

1500W should be plenty for the three GPUs running alongside an overclocked CPU, as well as the storage within

SOUND

Creative Soundblaster ZxR

$389 *creative.com*

Paradigm Cinema 110 + Marantz SR5009 amp

$3299 *aussiehifi.com.au*

STORAGE

2 Intel 750 1.2TB SSD + 2x 4TB HDDs (any)

$2990 + $480 *intel.com*

Over 2TB of the fastest SSDs around and 8TB of mass storage

DISPLAY

Asus ROG Swift PG27AQ

$1349 *asus.com.au*

This 4K panel comes with G-Sync and some of the fastest pixels in the biz

CASE

Cooler Master Cosmos II Ultra Tower $415 *coolermaster.com*

It's big, it's beautiful, and it's also nice and quiet

The compartmentalised interior ensures everything runs ice-cool

KEYBOARD

Corsair K70 Rapidfire RGB

$219 *corsair.com/en-au/*

Super fast and a pleasure to use – a new PCPP favourite

MOUSE

Tt esports Level 10M Advanced

$89.95 *au.ttesports.com*

Incredible performance and feel – the best mouse we've used in ages

HEADPHONES

Astra A50

$469 *www.astrogaming.com*

Astonishingly good sound quality, wireless freedom and superlative comfort

TOTAL: **$14,641.95**

BEAST EXTRAS

STEERING WHEEL

Fanatec ClubSport Wheel base, Formula Carbon and CSP v2 Pedals

$589 + $239 + $329

fanatec.com/au-en/

There's nothing better than "Germangineering" to deliver the most precise force feedback around

JOYSTICK

Saitek X56 Rhino + Saitek Combat Pro pedals

$337 + $225 *Saitek.com*

Our beloved Logitech controller is now impossible to find, but Saitek is still innovating

COCKPIT

Obutto oZone with Buttkicker Gamer 2 and TrackIR 5 Pro

$1100

You're going to need somewhere to mount your wheel and joystick, and the Obutto frame is a favourite of ours

PROJECTOR

Sony VPLVW1000ES

$25,999

sony.com.au

Sure, it's $26k and you'll need a big room to make the most of its huge image, but it's worth it when you see games running in 4K on a 3-metre-wide screen

VR

HTC Vive

$1350 *htcvive.com*

Until Oculus releases its Touch controllers, the Vive is the only all-encompassing VR experience

ROUTER

Asus RT-AC5300

$439 *asus.com.au*

It's expensive but worth it. MU-MINO technology, eight antennas that can be angled for best coverage, game prioritising – what more could you want?

STREAMING

Steambox and Controller

$75 + $75

store.steampowered.com

Why build a second PC for the lounge room when this $150 pack will do the job just as well?

TOTAL: **$30,896**

Tri-band data rate of of 5334 Mbps
Ultra-fast 802.11ac Wi-Fi router
Smooth 4K/UHD video playback

2.4 GHz 1000 Mbps
5 GHz-1 2167 Mbps
5 GHz-2 2167 Mbps

Exclusive Built-In Game Accelerator

SUBSCRIBE TO PC PowerPlay

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

FOR YOUR CHANCE TO WIN A...

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS COLLECTORS EDITION

PRIZES VALUED AT $1109.45!

+

10 COPIES OF TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON WILDLANDS FOR RUNNERS UP

Thanks to the good people at Ubisoft, 11 lucky subscribers will be able to take on the Bolivian drug cartels in Ghost Recon: WIldlands.

One lucky winner will receive:

- **A Calavera Collector's Case containing: a fully functioning headset, game map, Calavera skull model, a digital season pass, official soundtrack, a PC copy of Ghost Recon: Wildlands and more!**
- **10 runners up will receive a copy of Ghost Recon: Wildlands**

Good luck!

HOW TO ENTER: For your chance to win this fantastic prize, simply subscribe or renew to PC Powerplay and tell us in 25 words or less ***Where should the next Ghost Recon game take place and why?***

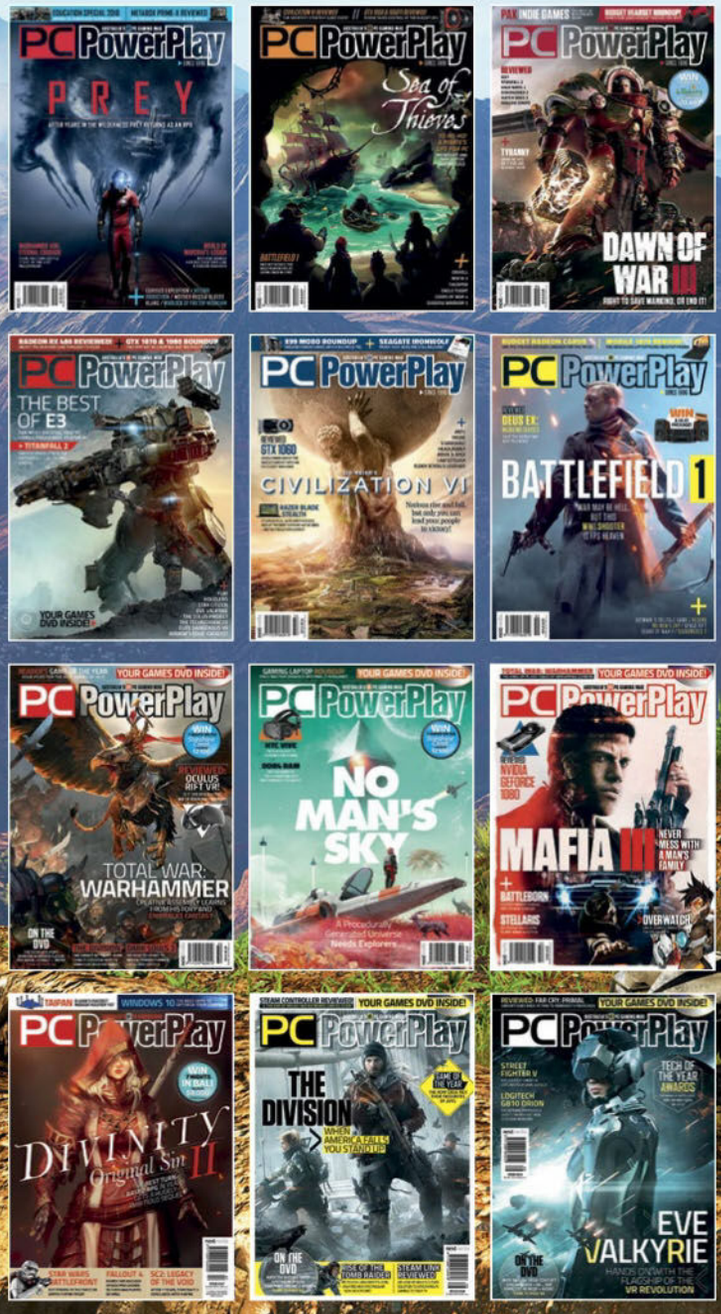
GET THE BEAST ON YOUR CHEST!

Receive a complimentary PCPP t-shirt when you subscribe

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON WILDLANDS

WHY SUBSCRIBE?

HUGE SAVINGS on cover price
FREE delivery to your door
NEVER miss an issue!
*BONUS t-shirt



mymagazines.com.au

SUBSCRIBE NOW!

3 EASY WAYS TO SUBSCRIBE!

Please photocopy the form if you don't want to ruin your awesome mag

ONLINE: mymagazines.com.au

OR CALL US:
1300 36 11 46
or +612 9901 6111 (overseas)

POST TO:
PCPP SUBSCRIPTIONS
LOCKED BAG 3355,
ST LEONARDS NSW 1590

YES! I'LL SUBSCRIBE TO PC PowerPlay

Me **Gift** (Please tick one)

☐ ☐ **26 DISC issues** (2 years) at $199.00 – SAVE OVER 44%
+ BONUS t-shirt

☐ ☐ **13 DISC issues** (1 year) at $129.00 – SAVE OVER $48
+ BONUS t-shirt

S **M** **L** **XL** (Select your T-Shirt size)

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Preferred t-shirt size (Australia & New Zealand Only)

(S: 49cm chest, 72cm length. M: 52cm chest, 75cm length. L: 55cm chest, 78cm length. XL: 58cm chest, 80cm length)

Enclosed is a cheque/money order for A$_____
made payable to nextmedia Pty Ltd OR please charge my credit card:

☐ Visa ☐ Mastercard ☐ American Express

☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐

Name on card:_____Expiry Date:_____/_____

Signature: _____ CVV:_____

My Details:

Full Name: _____

Address:_____

_____State:_____Postcode:_____

I am over 18 years of age ☐ Yes ☐ No

Daytime Telephone: ( )_____

E-mail Address:_____

Please provide phone or email in case of delivery issues

Please Send this Gift Subscription to:

Full Name: _____

Address:_____

_____State:_____Postcode:_____

Daytime Telephone: ( )_____

E-mail Address:_____

In 25 words or less, Where should the next Ghost Recon game take place and why?_____

_____

_____

Rates and BONUS T-shirt available to Australian and NZ residents only. Ends 15/03/17. All rates include GST. Overseas Airmail Rates: 1 Yr (13 Disc issues) A$189. Savings based on total cover price. Subscriptions commence with the next available issue. Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery of your first magazine and separate delivery of your bonus t-shirt. T-shirt sizes are subject to availability and only while stocks last. A 1 year (12 month) subscription to PC Powerplay includes 11 disc issues and 2 special disc issues. This form may be used as a Tax Invoice. nextmedia Pty Limited ABN 84 128 805 970. Competition open to Aust and NZ residents over the age of 18 who subscribe, renew or extend their subscription to PC Powerplay between 16/2/17 and 15/3/17. As this is a game of skill subscribers must also answer the question provided in 25 words or less. One entry per eligible subscription. Competition commences 12:01am AEDT 16/02/17 and closes 11:59pm AEDT 15/03/17. One (1) subscriber will receive a Calavera Collector's Case which contains a fully functioning headset, game map, Calavera skull model, a digital season pass, official soundtrack and a PC copy of Ghost Recon:Wildlands. Ten (10) runner up subscribers will each receive a PC copy of Ghost Recon:Wildlands. Total prize pool valued at $1,109.45. Entries will be judged by the PC Powerplay editorial team on 21/3/17. The judge's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. The Promoter is nextmedia Pty Ltd. Please tick if you do not wish to receive special offers or information from nextmedia or its partners via ☐mail ☐email. Refer to www.nextmedia.com.au for the full Privacy Notice.

MA/259

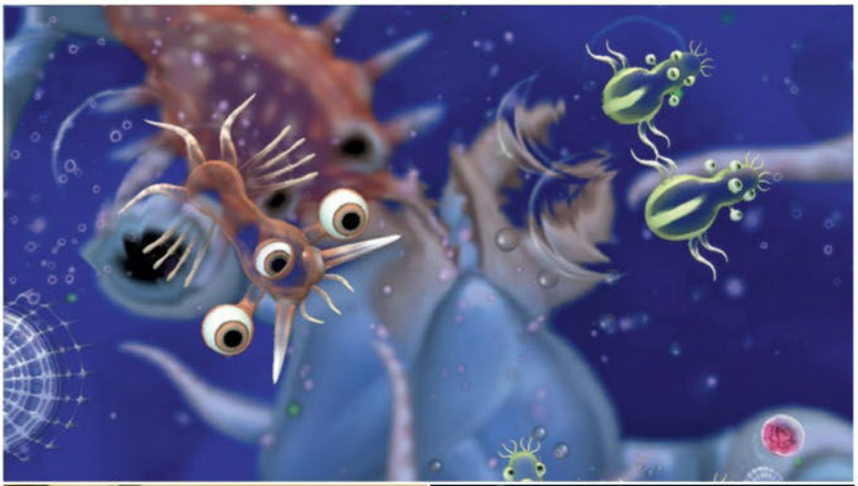
If you would prefer to receive your communication electronically, please ensure we have your current email address.

Dickbeasts, Dickbeasts Everywhere

A dream-team of developer talent led by a grandmaster of the form, came together to create a game that would simulate the evolution of life from single cell to galaxy-spanning empire. The result? Spore: The largest collection of penis-monsters ever assembled.

SPORE

DEVELOPER MAXIS
PERSONALITY WILL WRIGHT
RELEASED 2008
NUTSHELL Thanks to the power of modern PCs, Spore had a chance to be everything its developer promised. But fundamental design disagreements mutated that vision into something rather more profane.



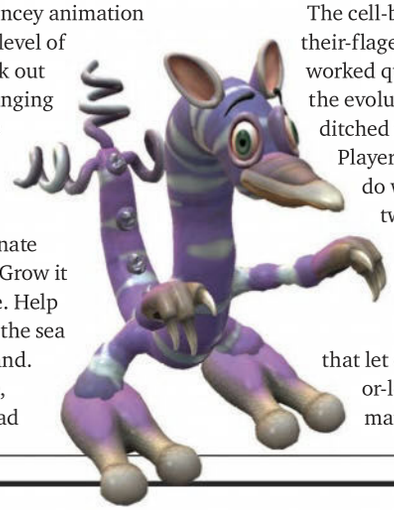
A central theme in Hagionaut games up until now has been the way the designers and developers of these titles expected too much of contemporary hardware. How nuts was Richard Garriott really, when he tried to build a massive 3D open world that could run on a machine that may not even have had a 3D accelerator?

Spore suffered no such restrictions. By 2008, PC hardware was so powerful that only vision (and programming skill, I guess) could hold back a game. Hell, this was a world that had already seen The Witcher. Oblivion was two years old. Civilization IV was in the bargain bins.

Hardware was no longer an excuse.

Maxis itself had already come to dominate PC sales charts with The Sims. Will Wright's decision to make a simulation game following the more-or-less ordinary life of an individual bloopy-voiced person made him one of the most respected designers still working.

The genius of The Sims was its perfect scope. One person, their family, their neighbourhood. Now, Wright wanted to go in the absolute opposite direction. Citing inspiration from those sciencey animation things that zoom in to the level of quarks and then zoom back out to the visible universe, changing scope by repeated "powers of ten", Spore was in fact originally called SimEverything.



Take a cell. Help it dominate its environment. Evolve it. Grow it into a multi-celled creature. Help that creature emerge from the sea and take its first steps on land. Help it survive, then thrive, then create a culture. Spread this species across the face of a planet, help it develop new technologies, spaceflight eventually, and ultimately help it dominate an entire galaxy.

Sure, now it sounds ridiculously ambitious. Spore wasn't one game, it was five games all mashed together, built in the same kind of time frame as a single title. Of course every element was like a sketchy, cut-down version of some other game.

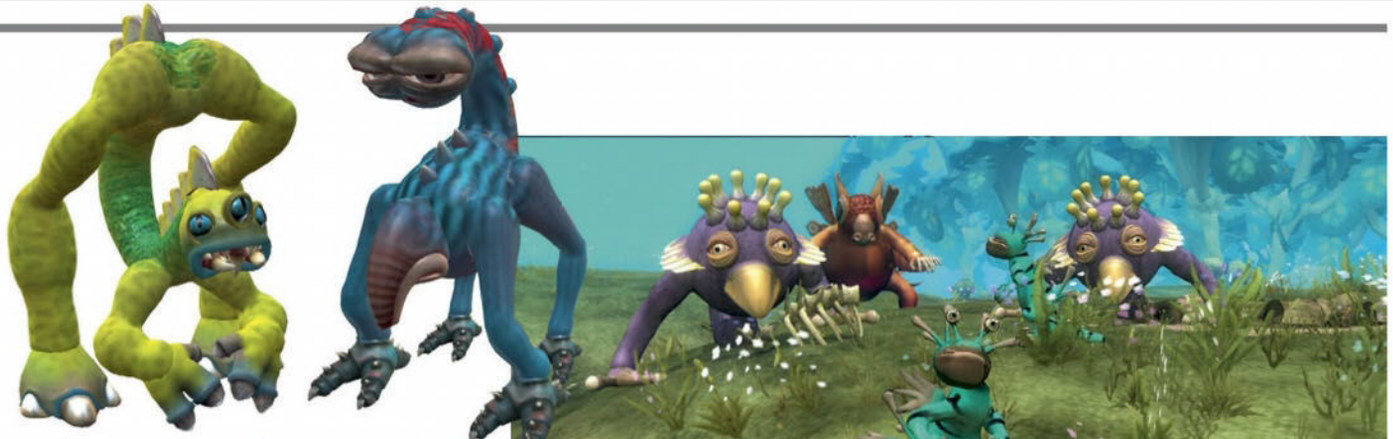
The cell-based "eat-em-to-take-their-flagella" 2D early game worked quite neatly. But all the evolution stuff was quickly ditched for the next stage.

Players could explicitly (and do we mean explicitly) tweak limbs, claws, heads, eyeballs. The game had an amazing adaptive animation system that let creatures move more-or-less realistically no matter how bizarre the player made them look.

But beyond designing the creature, Spore was just... well here's the thing. According to various members of the team writing post-mortem blogs years later, the mish-mash of ideas that survived were the result of endless compromise. The Spore group was all but paralysed by differences of design opinion. As each aspect of the game was siloed off, decisions became almost tribally entrenched.

At some point, as I read over those post-mortems and blogs and ruminations on Spore, its biggest problem became obvious: Its creators took the whole thing way too seriously.

Instead of knuckling down and creating a fun and challenging game, designers travelled the world giving important-sounding speeches. You can still find lead designer Chaim Gingold's infamous "magic crayon" speech online, where he goes on about how the creature creator transcends mere videogame design. "We definitely went more the route of soft mastery with



> As each aspect of the game was siloed off, decisions became almost tribally entrenched

the Spore Creature Creator," he says.

Sorry, what? What does THAT mean? Later, he goes on about how, as a bearded man, he made his Nintendo Mii avatar with a beard, decided he didn't like how it looked with a beard, and so shaved off his beard in real life. If you don't immediately see what this has to do with making a game like Spore fun, don't feel bad. I'm pretty sure Gingold doesn't know either.

This and other interviews went on, letting designers and coders alike wax lyrical about how amazing it was the creatures took up so little memory space, about how symmetry is so important and natural, about how hard it was to implement the leg slider controls.

"If we know it's a chimney, we can have smoke coming out of it right?" Gingold has also been quoted as saying. The specific context doesn't matter. All that matters is that, at some point, Spore's development team disappeared up its own sense of artistic and philosophical importance.

Because after all this, after all the interviews quoting Derrida, and other developers breathlessly saying they couldn't wait to see what people would create, Spore was released (delayed, natch) and we all had the chance to discover for ourselves what should probably have been apparent from the start.

Apart from the creature creator, Spore was a big pile of meh. Standard criticism described it as being five games in one, right? But the five games in question were just a bizarre mix: Pac-Man for the cell-stage, Diablo for the initial creature-stage, Populous for the village-stage, Civilization for the planet-stage and Master of Orion for the galaxy-stage.

Those last three might seem the most coherently iterative, but they were also the weakest, sketchiest, least-engaging part of Spore. Really, after you've designed a creature, the fun is all but gone.

Conceived in today's market, Spore would be a smartphone app. The core creature-designer would have been free, with extra eyes and horns and whatnot unlockable for credits. Social media (around, but not nearly so lucrative back in 2008) would have allowed creatures to interact with each other. Maybe there could have been an AR element and Maxis would right now be billions richer *(Or at least still in business - Ed.)*

Alas though, self-important philosopher-poets decided they were helping the world understand science. Or maybe making a statement about intelligent design? Either way Spore was eventually slammed by evolutionary biologists for being "unnecessarily wrong".

It was praised by the gaming press, of course. Because the first decade of the 21st century was a time in which games were being held up as IMPORTANT and ART and LITERATURE. Having fun was merely a bourgeois side effect.

ANTHONY FORDHAM PC

A WORLD MADE ENTIRELY OF PENISES

What's all this about dickbeasts then? How can I write 1000 words titled "Dickbeasts, Dickbeasts Everywhere" without mentioning dickbeasts?

Thing is, as Spore's development dragged, Maxis released the Spore Creature Creator as a stand alone, uh, game. It had enough features to allow gamers to create and upload creatures. Total freeform. No restrictions. Do what you want. But don't forget to take pictures and put them online.

So of course people immediately began making dickbeasts. Beasts, I'm saying, that look like dicks. Imagine, if you will, an entire planetary ecology where the phenotype of every major vertebrate is informed entirely and exclusively by the shape of the human penis. Some dickbeasts were tall and slender, others all balls. Still more had multiple dicks, others had dicks where terrestrial mammals might have hair. Or eyes. Or, oddly enough, dicks.

A celebration of the endless forms made possible by the humble penis. Forget the Sims. This will always and forever be Will Wright's legacy.

Mushroom Kingdom

DANIEL WILKS is never prone to hyperbole

In the PC market, when it comes to new tech we're accustomed to some hyperbole when it comes to press releases and announcements. When a new videocard comes out, the maker of the chip will usually put up some graph showing how much more powerful it is that a previous generation card, hoping that people will concentrate on the graph rather than the small print saying that the card the new model is being tested against is generations old. The same goes with CPUs, often to show their power they will be pitted against something far inferior or much older. Despite these cheap and rather cheesy tactics, one thing that tech vendors will always do, is release detailed tech specs, often with accompanying numbers to show the real power of the new product. Sure, these number may come from absolutely ideal circumstances all but impossible to replicate outside of a lab, but they are a genuine indicator of what goes into the technology and its general capabilities. Most vendors will also answer questions to the best of their ability to fill in any gaps.

Imagine what it would be like if big tech vendors, like Acer, Dell, Asus, Corsair and the like treated consumers in the same manner as Nintendo did at their recent Switch announcement. Next to no technical information was given out during the announcement, and what was announced was cursory at best. After the announcement, Nintendo approached me to see if I had any questions that needed to be answered about the product. I had five questions detailing the capabilities of the console. Of the five, two were partially answered with single sentence answers that ignored the actual question and instead rephrased it so generic marketing spiel could be used. One was given what appears to be a back of the box quote about resolution and the other two were answered by not being answered at all.

It would be easy to say that this lack of transparency is a reflection of the console market, but given the fact that both Sony and Microsoft are more than willing not only to give out their tech specs but answer in-depth questions about design and hardware, it seems that Nintendo are the only anomaly. Are they afraid that their specs will be so inferior to competition that it will hurt the brand, or do they genuinely believe that people don't care to know what their new console is actually capable of? After I failed to post the "interview" on one of the Next Media websites, Nintendo got in contact to ask why. After a polite but rather terse explanation, I was asked to send some more questions. I wonder how many of the ten I sent over will actually be answered. Given that all of them are looking for technical detail, I doubt any will.

▲ Sorry, but this caption cannot possibly comment.

So why am I talking about a console on PC PowerPlay? Don't worry - the much maligned and wrong-headed Xbox section isn't making a comeback or anything like that. It's just that, despite how frustrating it is to receive dozens of press releases a day, nearly all of which proclaim that X new product is a revolution in PC gaming (like RGB fans, RGB mouse pads, RGB power supplies and the occasional thing that doesn't have RGBs), I'd still rather have to wade through the bullshit to find the facts than have shit shovelled on me and be denied the facts. I'm not a mushroom, and neither are consumers, no matter what Nintendo seems to think. PC

> "Imagine what it would be like if big tech vendors treated consumers in the same manner Nintendo did at their recent Switch announcement"

SHATTERED SKIES ■ INSIDE ■ STARBOUND ■ ZOMBIE NIGHT TERROR ■ FATED ■ DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED ■ NO MAN'S SKY ■ PHANTARUK ■ HEART&SLASH ■ BATMAN: A TELLTALE GAME ■ SPACE RIFT ■ ETERNAL CRUSADE ■ WOW: LEGION ■ OBDUCTION ■ RECORE ■ KLANG ■ THE CURIOUS EXPEDITION MOTHER RUSSIA BLEEDS ■ WARLOCK OF FIRETOP MOUNTAIN ■ REDOUT ■ CIVILIZATION VI ■ THUMPER ■ BATTLEFIELD 1 ■ EAGLE FLIGHT ■ MAFIA 3 ■ GEARS OF WAR 4 ■ ORWELL ■ SHADOW WARRIOR 2 ■ ARAGAMI DISHONORED 2 ■ MALLOW DROPS ■ WATCH DOGS 2 ■ SARA IS MISSING ■ ICEY ■ FARMING SIMULATOR 17 ■ TITANFALL 2 ■ TYRANNY ■ X-COM 2 ■ HOMEWORLD: DESERTS OF KHARAK ■ RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER ■ DARKEST DUNGEON ■ DRAGON'S DOGMA: DARK ARISEN ■ FAR CRY: PRIMAL ■ DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING ■ STREET FIGHTER V ■

SUPERHOT ■ GRIM DAWN ■ FIREWATCH ■ LAYERS OF FEAR ■ THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD ■ DEATHSMILES ■ WE ARE THE DWARVES ■ THE DIVISION ■ GEARS OF WAR ■ HITMAN ■ DARK SOULS 3 ■ BATTLEFIELD GOTHIC: ARMADA ■ NEED FOR SPEED ■ QUANTUM BREAK ■ OFFWORLD TRADING COMPANY ■ 1979 REVOLUTION: BLACK FRIDAY ■ AURION: LEGACY OF THE KORI-ODAN ■ CODE OF PRINCESS ■ THE BANNER SAGA 2 ■ HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER ■ OVERWATCH ■ TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER ■ BATTLEBORN ■ DOOM ■ HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION ■ STELLARIS ■ GOLIATH ■ ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST ■ KILLER INSTINCT ■ AUDIOSHIELD ■ THE TECHNOMANCER ■ MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST ■ EVE VALKYRIE ■ ELITE DANGEROUS VR ■ ONECHANBARA ZZ CHAOS ■ THE SOLUS PROJECT ■ ANIMA: GATE OF MEMORIES ■ FURI ■ STAR CITIZEN ALPHA 2.4.0 ■ I AM SETSUNA ■ ABZU ■ ARMA 3: APEX ■ NECROPOLIS ■ HEADLANDER ■ SHATTERED SKIES ■ INSIDE ■ STARBOUND ■ ZOMBIE NIGHT TERROR ■ FATED ■ DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED ■ NO MAN'S SKY ■ PHANTARUK ■ HEART&SLASH ■ BATMAN: A TELLTALE GAME ■ SPACE RIFT ■ ETERNAL CRUSADE ■ WOW:

PCPP READER'S GAME OF THE YEAR 2016

✦ Please fill in the categories you feel passionate about with two or three lines as to why you think that game is the best of the year.

To enter your votes either email your nominations and comments to letters@pcpowerplay.com.au or head to pcpowerplay.com.au and fill in the Reader's Game of the Year form.

One lucky voter will receive a mystery gaming prize!

MOST INNOVATIVE GAME/TECH:

BEST SHOOTER:

BEST STRATEGY GAME:

BEST RPG/ADVENTURE:

BEST RACING/DRIVING GAME:

BEST ACTION GAME:

BEST GAMEPLAY:

BEST INDIE GAME:

BEST GRAPHICS:

BEST SOUND:

BEST SINGLEPLAYER:

BEST MULTIPLAYER:

BEST STORYTELLING:

BEST VOICE/MOCAP PERFORMANCE :

OVERALL GAME OF THE YEAR:

Post: Fill out and photocopy this page and send your entries to **PC PowerPlay, Nextmedia, Locked Bag 5555, ST LEONARDS NSW 1590**
Scan: Fill out and scan this page and email your entries to **letters@pcpowerplay.com.au**
Online: Fill out the questionairre at **www.pcpowerplay.com.au**

NEED FOR SPEED ■ QUANTUM BREAK ■ OFFWORLD TRADING COMPANY ■ 1979 REVOLUTION: BLACK FRIDAY ■ AURION: LEGACY OF THE KORI-ODAN ■ CODE OF PRINCESS ■ THE BANNER SAGA 2 ■ HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER ■ OVERWATCH ■ TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER ■ BATTLEBORN ■ DOOM ■ HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION ■ STELLARIS ■ GOLIATH ■ ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST ■ KILLER INSTINCT ■ AUDIOSHIELD ■ THE TECHNOMANCER ■ MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST ■ EVE VALKYRIE ■ ELITE DANGEROUS VR ■ ONECHANBARA ZZ CHAOS ■ THE SOLUS PROJECT ■ ANIMA: GATE OF MEMORIES ■ FURI ■ STAR CITIZEN ALPHA 2.4.0 ■ I AM SETSUNA ■ ABZU ■ ARMA 3: APEX ■ NECROPOLIS ■ HEADLANDER ■ SHATTERED SKIES ■ INSIDE ■ STARBOUND ■ ZOMBIE NIGHT TERROR ■ FATED ■ DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED ■ NO MAN'S SKY ■ PHANTARUK ■ HEART&SLASH ■ BATMAN

PC PowerPlay | AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

ISSUE 260 ON SALE

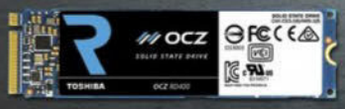
MARCH 16

TOSHIBA
Leading Innovation »»

LET YOUR PERFORMANCE FLY

OCZ RD400

NVMe® PCIe® 3.0 x 4 Solid State Drive



OCZ RD400 PCIe® NVMe® M.2 SSD

Next generation NVMe interface, the RD400 is designed for mobile, desktop and workstation applications.

- Sequential Read/Write: Up to 2,600/1,600 MB/s
- Random Read/Write (4KiB): Up to 210,000/140,000 IOPS
- Available in: 128GB, 256GB, 512GB, 1024GB
- 5-Year Advanced Warranty Program*

OCZ VX500 SATA 6 Gbit/s 2.5-inch SSD

Suitable for users with write-intensive PC environments that will take system performance to the next level.

- Sequential Read/Write: Up to 550/515 MB/s
- Random Read/Write (4KiB): Up to 92,000/65,000 IOPS
- Available in: 128GB, 256GB, 512GB, 1024GB
- 5-Year Advanced Warranty Program*

OCZ TL100 SATA 6 Gbit/s 2.5-inch SSD

Designed to make your storage upgrade affordable for value-oriented users to boost system performance.

- Sequential Read/Write: Up to 550/530 MB/s
- Random Read/Write (4KiB): Up to 85,000/80,000 IOPS
- Available in: 120GB, 240GB
- 3-Year Advanced Warranty Program*

* Available to limited regions and countries
- IOPS: Input Output Per Second (or the number of I/O operations per second)
- Read and write speed may vary depending on the host device, read and write conditions, and file size.
- Subject to Change: While Toshiba has made every effort at the time of publication to ensure the accuracy of the information provided herein, product specifications, configurations, prices, system/component/options availability are all subject to change without notice. Product image may represent design model.
- NVM Express® and NVMe® are trademarks of NVM Express, Inc.
- PCIe and PCI Express are registered trademarks of PCI-SIG.
- A kibibyte (KiB) means 2^{10}, or 1,024 bytes, a mebibyte (MiB) means 2^{20}, or 1,048,576 bytes, and a gibibyte (GiB) means 2^{30}, or 1,073,741,824 bytes.
- Definition of capacity: Toshiba defines a megabyte (MB) as 1,000,000 bytes, a gigabyte (GB) as 1,000,000,000 bytes and a terabyte (TB) as 1,000,000,000,000 bytes. A computer operating system, however, reports storage capacity using powers of 2 for the definition of 1GB = 2^{30} = 1,073,741,824 bytes and therefore shows less storage capacity. Available storage capacity (including examples of various media files) will vary based on file size, formatting, settings, software and operating system, such as Microsoft Operating System and/or pre-installed software applications, or media content. Actual formatted capacity may vary.

© 2016 TOSHIBA CORPORATION, All Rights Reserved. OCZ is a trademark or a registered trademark of Toshiba Corporation and/or its affiliates.

ocz.com

AORUS

YOUR GAME. YOUR WAY.

ASCEND TO GREATNESS

AORUS GAMING MOTHERBOARDS

GIGABYTE™

www.gigabyte.com.au